OWARIMONOGATARI

END TALE PART 01

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
KO RANSOM

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VERTICAL.

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Art by VOFAN

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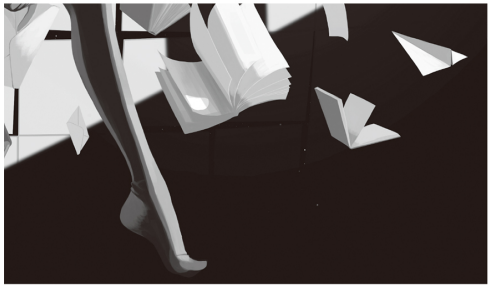
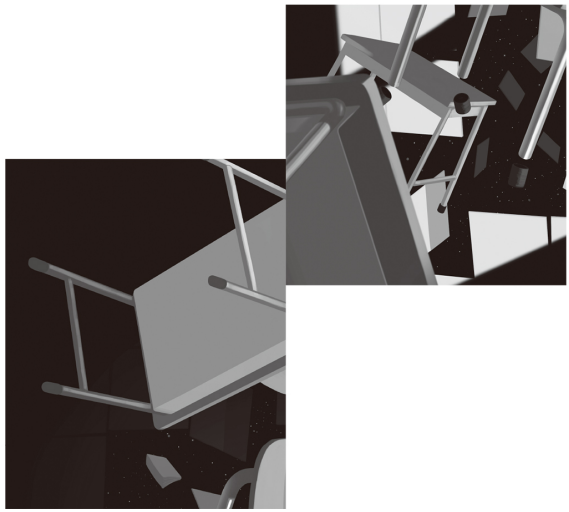
CHAPTER ONE OGI FORMULA



CHAPTER TWO SODACHI RIDDLE



CHAPTER THREE SODACHI LOST

OWARIMONOGATARI, PART 01

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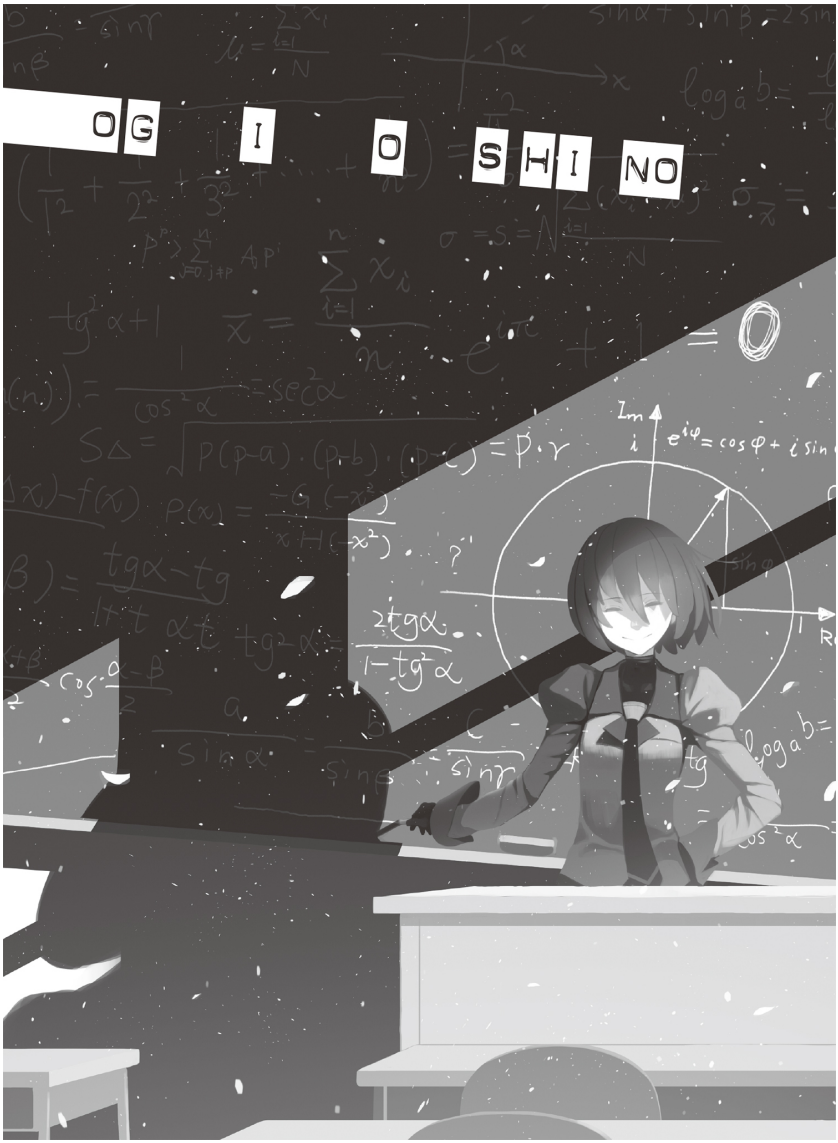
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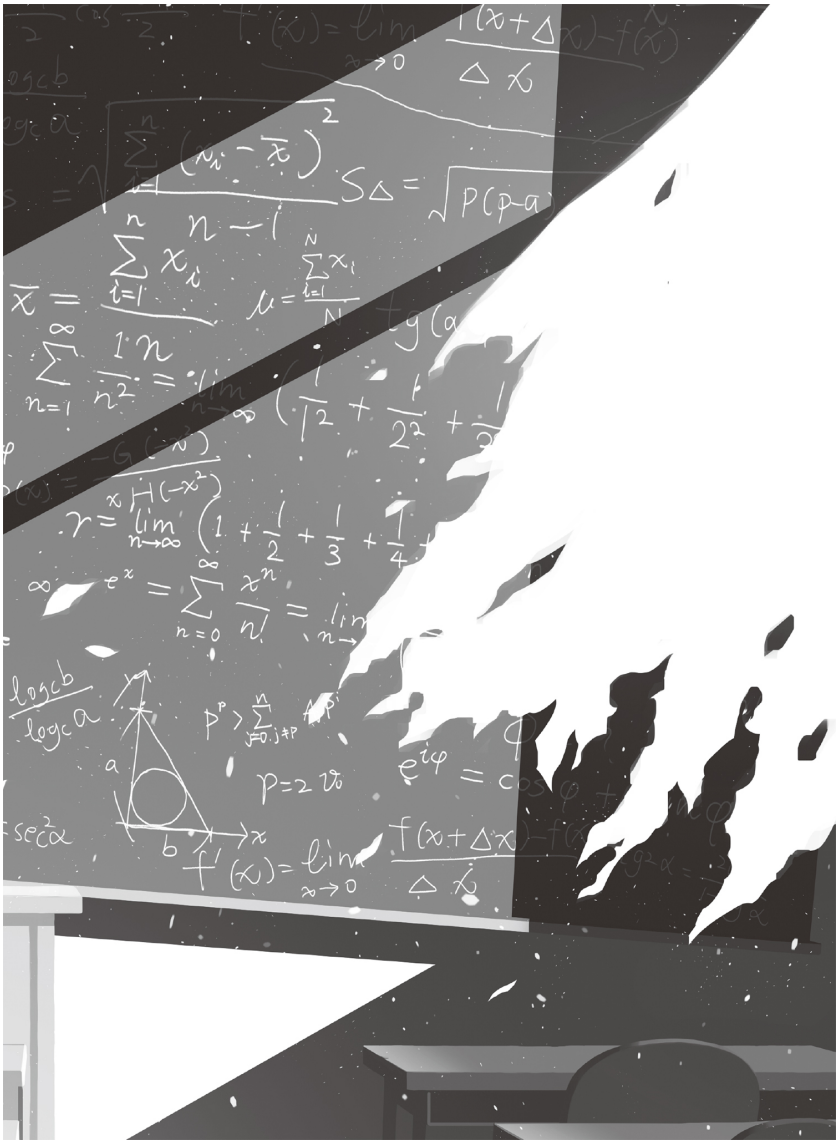

001

Ogi Oshino is Ogi Oshino. That is the entirety of what can be said as far as that transfer student is concerned. Once you state her name, there's nothing left to say on the subject. You could of course make the point that everyone is someone and absolutely no one else—ultimately, that is all that should be said about any person. Tsubasa Hanekawa is Tsubasa Hanekawa, and Hitagi Senjogahara is Hitagi Senjogahara—yes, just as Koyomi Araragi is Koyomi Araragi. But even then, Ogi Oshino was just so Ogi Oshino. She was so singularly Ogi Oshino that she was nothing else. Ogi Oshino is Ogi Oshino in the same way you don't like things you don't like, how no means no. Any further discussion would be fruitless, utterly so. In the sense that she's so firmly defined, so wholly decided and determined, so completely unshakable, she is extremely mathematical—yes, second only to how much she is Ogi Oshino.

Speaking of math, are you familiar with what they call the most beautiful formula in the history of mathematics? Wait, don't even answer that, you'll recall it once you hear it. If you ask me, forget math, I want to say it's the most beautiful formula in human history: $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$. Also known as Euler's Formula. It uses e, the base of the natural logarithm, π, the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter, i, the unit imaginary number, then 1 and 0 all in the same graceful formula, as if it had come together by such designed necessity that if there is a God, it'd be the most convincing evidence for His existence.

What's interesting—rather, what's beautiful is how this formula had to exist. There's your answer if you ever get asked that on a test. In other words, Euler's Formula is not a product of human expression but of human excavation. Even if mankind had never existed in this world, even if there wasn't a single brain to think about the base of the natural logarithm, the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter, imaginary numbers, 1, or 0, the base of the natural logarithm raised to the power of the ratio of a circle's circumference

to its diameter multiplied by the unit imaginary number added to one would have still been 0.

It's beautiful—but when you think about it in that way, it's also scary.

It seems that in society these days, what we call the world is a vague and hazy thing mutable and subject to being turned on its head with the greatest of ease, yesterday's common sense becoming today's senselessness, the rules in the morning breaking the rules at night, not one value set in stone, all of us aimless and adrift, which is why the future as a blank slate is the only thing that can give us hope—or so it seems, but really, isn't the future, which is to say the unknown, already determined, and we just don't know? Instead of it being the unknown, maybe we're just uninformed?

If someone who doesn't know the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter calculated it, the result would be pi. The theory of relativity was always there, even if Einstein never used the full powers of his brilliance. You don't have to know who Beethoven is in order to produce the sounds of Symphony No. 5, you just have to play the notes from its score—what, you wouldn't be as moved? In that case, just play it the same way as the version that does move you. As hard as it is to believe, likewise you don't have to be the genius among geniuses Vincent van Gogh to come up with Sunflowers, even the rankest of novices could, simply by using the same strokes, pressure, and materials in the same environment from the same perspective to paint the same flowers. Let monkeys bash typewriters for long enough and they'll eventually produce Shakespeare, right?

Answers don't change—laws don't change.

When people feel that something has "changed" or "become new," it's nothing more than a cute little illusion arising from the fact that a different, pre-existing program has been executed.

In that sense, there's nothing in the world or its future that even resembles a "playful ambiguity" or "vague margin." What exists are only hard laws that state, "Do X and Y will happen." Just as how you don't like things you don't like, how no means no—not only is

what's set in stone set in stone, there is no room there to impose your will, no opening for your heart. Therefore, all expression is only excavation, all that's devised is only discovered. No, even these discoveries may only be rediscoveries—even the impossible task that continues to torment me as I desperately seek its solution might have a ready-made model answer, all of my trial and error nothing more than a detour on the way to arriving at it—from the perspective of someone in the know.

Someone in the know.

A monster, perhaps.

Still, Ogi Oshino, that transfer student, might offer some frank advice regarding even the beauty of Euler's Formula.

Something like this.

"Yes, it's beautiful—so beautiful and gorgeous that I could faint. The most beautiful part of all is the way the answer is zero. That said, I feel like there isn't really any reason to calculate all that out if the answer is just going to be zero."

Upon hearing this, I would think: Ogi Oshino is Ogi Oshino, and that's all there is to say about it. Everything is zero before her, and no matter how unlike herself she may act, that act becomes so much like her—and so this is a tale about math.

Let's do some studying.

I know some of you might put your guard up when you hear the word math, so we could break that down and say this is a story about arithmetic—or to be even more straightforward, a story about numbers. After all, this is a story whose solution is decided by the larger number—which is to say, it's a story about majority rule.

Majority rule.

The one way to turn even something wrong into the truth.

A building-block system that seeks collusion, not happiness.

Our inequality formula, for formulating iniquity.

You could say it’s the one true human invention as well as the ugliest formula in human history.

002

If any of you've experienced being locked in an enigmatic classroom alone with an underclassman you're meeting for the first time and an hour has already passed, I would've loved to ask you for advice□of course, my phone seemed to be out of service, and the room appeared to block any wi-fi signal as well. Even seeking outside advice appeared to be beyond me.

"No good, Araragi-senpai□" she said.

Ogi trotted over to me with tiny steps as I frantically used the full strength of my hands and feet to try and open the classroom's front door.

"Oh, um, I don't mean that you're no good. I tried a lot of different things, but neither large window nor high window budged an inch, is what I'm trying to say."

"…How'd I ever misinterpret it as 'no-good Araragi-senpai' in this situation?"

What kind of an aside was that?

"No good, either," I said, slightly upset.

"No good, huh? That's what I thought."

"You're doing it on purpose, aren't you? Trying to make me sound no good."

Oh, not even a smidge□Ogi denied with the smile of someone playing dumb. Then again, despite her full, bright smile, she didn't seem to me like someone who liked jokes too much. I decided to believe her for the time being.

From the moment we learned that we were apparently locked in

there, Ogi and I had divided up the labor and attempted every escape method possible—me trying the regular entrances and exits, which is to say the doors at the front and back, while she investigated the windows.

“It isn’t like they’re locked… It’s like they’ve been fixed in place with glue or something,” I gave my thoughts on the matter, stretching my numbed arms around and around, after close to an hour in combat with the doors. As a senior, it was a little embarrassing to have spent a full hour to come to an “or something” conclusion, but facts were facts.

Meanwhile, Ogi—a Naoetsu High novice, a freshman and transfer student—shared her own better-informed findings with a soft smile.

“Right, as stated above, the windows are not budging one inch. Regarding any locks, the crescent ones installed on the windows are mobile. You can engage and disengage them freely—they can even be locked once engaged. The all-important window frame is immobile, though. When the crescent locks are engaged, of course, but also when they aren’t—as if they’ve been fixed in place with glue ‘or something,’ as you put it.”

“…”

By imitating my childish expression at the end, was she deferring to me, as her senior, or trying to insult me? Debatable.

“Every window, without exception?”

“Yes. Of course I gave each one a try. I’d never use a sample survey to cut corners—the large windows, the high windows, the hallway windows, the gym-side windows.”

They don’t move, she reported.

“The gym-side windows…” I muttered, turning to look in that direction. To be honest, it wasn’t the fact we were locked in, but that side, that direction, that was the real problem.

True, there was nothing visibly off about it—there was no world of demons on the other side of the window, no pack of dinosaurs or

sea of flames. All I saw was a plain gym—Naoetsu High's regular old gym. The basketball team that Kanbaru retired from was probably busy at work inside—well, I couldn't hear any sounds coming from it, but maybe any external noise had been shut out from the classroom?

The ban on entering and exiting was comprehensive if it included sound, but even that didn't seem to be a problem—not compared to what I saw on the other side of the window. No, like I said, the gym was just a plain gym.

Nothing unusual about the sight—except, we shouldn't have been able to see the gym given the angle of the school building we were in.

"Normally, we should be seeing the school field from here."

Yes, this building that Ogi and I had walked to stood parallel to the athletic field—we should've been able to espy the baseball team or the track team from where we were, not the indoor basketball team.

"…"

I felt like sticking my body out of the window, turning my head to look about, and getting a better understanding of what I was seeing outside, but even that was out of the question since the windows didn't so much as open. All I could do was get an unnatural, uncanny feeling from our regular old gym.

Or maybe I was confused? Could I have come to a building facing the gym by accident, instead of the building facing the athletic grounds? No, I'd never make such an awful mistake, not when I was trying to show off to an underclassman I was meeting for the first time.

To begin with, the way we could see the gym from the window was unnatural. We were supposed to be on the third floor. Unless we were on the fifth floor, or at least the fourth, the roof shouldn't have been visible—if I'd brought us to the wrong building, though, it was certainly possible we were on the wrong floor…

But even if seeing something that shouldn't have been there was due to some mishap, it didn't change the fact that Ogi and I were currently shut in a room.

Still, apart from sticking my body out of a window, was there no way of figuring out what floor we were on? Just as I was spinning my wheels

"Then maybe it's about time," Ogi said.

"About time? For what?"

"To take to more extreme measures. I mean, both you and I are going to starve if we don't do something. We'll starve and wither and die."

"Yeah, I guess…"

Starving to death sounded a bit exaggerated at this point in time, but it was an inevitability if we continued to be stuck there. I mean, I felt confident that I could endure a little hunger, but the same couldn't be said about Ogi, who was still in the middle of her growth spurt.

"But more extreme measures?"

When I turned to ask her what she meant, I saw there was no reason to it was clear as day. Ogi was holding up, with both arms, one of the many desks that lined the classroom. As if it was cleaning time and they needed to be moved, so that the floor could be wiped down but she wanted to do the complete opposite, to make a mess.

"One, two…"

On her own count, Ogi tossed the desk at the window. Not the hallway window, but the gym-side one (which should have been facing the athletic grounds). The hallway window was too dangerous, in case someone was walking on the other side, she told me later, but I don't see much of a difference in risk between that and hurling it out of the building. In fact, the added potential energy (whether we were on the third floor or the fifth) could make both the broken glass and the flying desk that much more

dangerous—but such fears turned out to be groundless.

The desk that Ogi threw at the window, which is to say at the glass, oh-so-naturally bounced off it like a Super Ball off a hard wall, expelling the contents—textbooks, notebooks, pencil case—onto the classroom floor. It seemed the owner wasn't much for taking homework home, and the jumble could only be described as a pitiful sight. As for the desk, it came to a rest upside down, but not before a number of bounces.

There wasn't a single scratch on the glass.

On that same note, the desk that came bouncing back, as well as its scattered contents, wasn't destroyed or cracked. The "extreme measure" Ogi had taken—resulted in no results whatsoever.

"Maybe you could've thrown a desk that didn't have anything in it? Considering the aftermath," I nitpicked—but really, if we were going to go there, did she have to force herself to toss a desk? Wasn't, uh, a chair easier to hold? This was glass she was trying to break, so even if using her bare hands was out of the question, why would a slender-armed girl like her, by no means well-built, choose a desk—but my doubts were soon addressed.

Which is to say, Ogi picked up a ballpoint pen (which was once inside a pencil case) from among the stuff scattered on the floor. With it in hand, she walked toward the blackboard. As if tossing not a chair but a packed desk at the window had killed two birds with one stone, and she'd saved herself the trouble of extracting the pen. Call it rational, or lazy—but as my doubt was addressed, a new one popped up. What exactly was she going to do with the pen? A click drew my attention, and it seemed she'd extended its tip, but you wrote on blackboards with chalk, not with—

"!"

I didn't even have time to stop her. She scraped the blackboard with the ballpoint pen. Across the classroom, more sealed than usual, that awful screeching noise that torments the nerves worse than any other—didn't spread.

There was no sound.

It didn't seem like she'd held back, she'd slashed as if she were wielding a katana, yet no marks were left behind on the blackboard, not even the pen's ink. I almost began to think that my eyes had been tricked into thinking she'd scratched it while she'd whiffed somehow.

"…No good. Hmm."

"Wh-What were you trying to do there, Ogi?"

"Well, since I couldn't destroy the window with a strike, I thought I'd try to shatter it using acoustic resonance," she casually informed me. So this girl nonchalantly attempted something as advanced as destroy a window through sonic force□but she'd failed. And as if she'd accounted for this from the start, her expression stayed nonchalant as she tossed the pen to the floor.

Throwing a desk to try to break a window and to procure a ballpoint pen at the same time might be rational, but leaving such a mess in the process is surely irrational, I thought, tidying up the area to return the classroom to its original state. Ah, but then, wasn't it rational in its own way to make such a big mess that I'd want to clean up, just as I was doing?

"Hm?"

As I gathered the textbooks and placed them inside the desk that I'd flipped back up, I caught a glimpse of the name written on them in sharpie: Fukado, Class 1-3.

So this was a first-year classroom? It had to be since that's what it said… I hadn't looked closely at the sign upon entering; in fact, I didn't even recall if there was a sign to begin with. But wait□Fukado? Fukado… Well, I guess it was a common enough name?

"I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're busy at work, but could you please come over this way?"

Ogi's voice derailed my train of thought. I wanted to tell her I was

busy tidying up the mess she'd made, but I stopped picking up for a moment anyway and began walking toward the front door—which I'd been battling until moments earlier, and where Ogi had moved without me noticing.

"Oh, no, no—back up a step, please. A little to the right, no, too much, to the left. Hmm, back half a step. Okay, now puff out your chest a little."

…Her instructions were so detailed. I didn't have a clue as to what she was trying to do, or why she was trying to do it—because I was assuming she'd decided to give her violent approaches toward the classroom a rest after throwing a desk at a window and scraping the blackboard. But no, she had another trick to try. And it was one hell of a violent one.

Just as I thought she was bending her knees low, Ogi unleashed a powerful elbow thrust into my solar plexus—ripping straight through me before my reflexes could spring into action.

"Ghaak!"

With my chest puffed out just as instructed, my body acted like a spring, bending at a right angle before falling head over heels and collapsing on the spot. My head nearly hit the door, thanks to the sheer force—but only grazed it, and I lay cowering on the floor.

"Kha…k. Wh-What… Ogi, you…"

"Hm. No good after all," she deadpanned, looking at me with scorn as I struggled to so much as breathe. She showed zero signs of guilt. "Well, I just thought I might be able to erode the door with stomach acid. You know, even if strikes and resonance don't work, we might still be able to melt it away. Looks like that approach doesn't get it done either, though. All we did was make the door filthy. Not that a couple of drops of your stomach acid would dissolve the entire thing, anyway—wipe it down for me later, okay?"

"…"

She'd aimed not for my solar plexus but my stomach—her goal had

been to make me spew bile. The girl did some crazy things with that gentle expression of hers. Why did I have to get sucker-punched by a girl I was meeting for the first time? What had I done to deserve this?

“Oh, sorry. Did that hurt?” she asked so shamelessly that I couldn’t even be mad. In fact, it was almost refreshing—and to tell the truth, I was fortunate enough to be used to this level of violence, given my home environment.

What kind of domestic abusers did I live with to be used to getting punched in the stomach?

Forget this life, I must be dealing with karma from a previous one.

“Not really. It’s no big deal,” I tried to keep up appearances as I got up. Then again, while acting calm was one thing, if this was what I got for trying to impress an underclassman, it was probably about time I reconsidered my stance.

“Ah, I knew I could count on you. I wouldn’t have minded spewing my own stomach acid, but I thought it might be a little too extreme of a visual. You’re the type who’d rather hock up his own digestive juices than make a girl puke hers, so I saw fit to defer to you.”

“How very considerate… And yes, I’m the type who’d rather spit up his own stomach acid than cause a girl to do the same.”

This was far too specific as far as personality traits go, not to mention the bizarre underlying assumption that someone had to vomit, but I went along with Ogi’s conversation as she stood there, smiling. Whether it was the smile of someone relying on an upperclassman’s kindness, or of someone making a total fool of him, was once again hard to tell.

So unfathomable.

It really did make sense that she was his niece—despite looking nothing at all like him.

“In any case,” I said, “this means the windows and the doors can’t be destroyed. We of course don’t have any professional tools at our

disposal, so I doubt we'd be able to plow through a wall, either."

"If only we had some plastic explosives," Ogi remarked troublingly, since I could see her using a bomb without a second thought if she had access to one, considering how quick she'd been to elbow me. Of course, whether or not that would work was a different question we might not come out of it unscathed, for one thing.

"Yikes. Looks like we're in this for the long haul. The real threat here is driving ourselves crazy by struggling and failing to get out. Let's just wait for someone on the outside to help us, Ogi luckily, Kanbaru knows we're here," I said magisterially, in as bright and cheerful of a tone as I could manage.

I wasn't as relaxed as that, to be honest, but I wanted to make this junior of mine feel safe and show her just how mature I was. From her perspective, just being locked in the same space as a boy she was meeting for the first time must have been worrying enough… In that light, her earlier elbow strike could be interpreted as a kind of threat, an expression of her apprehension.

Whatever the case, it felt like I was being tested as a man through my actions. Or that the wrong choice could lead to my downfall.

"I wonder." Ogi sounded calm, not concerned at all but might have been putting on a brave face just like me. "As a big fan of hers, I'd love it too if Kanbaru-senpai saved us but I'm afraid our chances of anyone on the outside rescuing us are slim."

"Hm? Why's that? Two students suddenly disappearing after school someone would have to notice that, even if it wasn't Kanbaru. There'd be an uproar, among your classmates, and mine."

Uproar might have been an exaggeration my own classmates, at least, would treat my disappearance as nothing out of the ordinary. Including Senjogahara and Hanekawa. But in Ogi's case, a fresh transfer going missing would get people talking.

"Plus," I went on, "they'd know we never left school since we didn't take our bags. Soon enough, someone would find us here"

“You really do like depending on other people, don’t you? Even though people just go and get saved on their own.”

“!”

“I’m sorry. That’s my uncle’s creed not anything to do with you or me. That said, while counting on others isn’t such a bad thing, we mustn’t give up on trying to escape on our own just yet. I say that because…”

Ogi pointed at the clock hanging above the blackboard. And I froze the moment I saw it.

The clock’s hands.

From the moment we’d entered the classroom the hands of the clock hadn’t budged a single second or minute. We should have been locked in for over an hour by now but not a second had passed inside the classroom.

“Do you think it’s out of batteries? Because I certainly don’t,” Ogi said, smirking.

003

It all started on a late October day, exactly half a year after I was attacked by a golden-haired, golden-eyed vampire during spring break. Just as I was about to have lunch at my homeroom desk, my lovable junior Suruga Kanbaru came to visit.

“Hey there, Araragi-senpai! It’s me, Suruga Kanbaru!”

She was as energetic as ever.

“So you’re alone! All alone, huh?!”

She was also as rude as ever.

“I don’t know if I’d say alone,” I struggled to come up with an excuse. Well, part of me was simply overwhelmed and shrank in the face of all her positive energy. “Senjogahara and Hanekawa have gotten really chummy ever since second term started… Now they won’t eat with me.”

They were on a lunch date, no doubt. It was a rare case of female friendship overcoming romance.

“Huh. Then why not eat with some of your other friends? There’s nothing sadder than lunching alone,” pressed Kanbaru, with no consideration whatsoever. I didn’t dispute her point, but it’s also true that humans need to eat to survive—even if they don’t have any friends. Sadness, desolation, they’re a part of life, aren’t they?

Still, I couldn’t believe her. She’d walked into a third-year classroom undaunted—as if she might even grab an open seat without asking. Retired or not, it was indeed the kind of move you’d expect from a former star the entire school over.

“But I’m here with some good news for my sad little senior.”

“Good news? Interesting, tell me more. I love good news.”

I wasn’t that interested, but any topic was preferable to how sad I was eating lunch on my own—whether it was international relations, talk about the IT industry, good news, or bad news.

“Okay. There’s actually a girl I want to introduce you to,” Kanbaru said, pointing her left hand, wrapped again and again in a bandage, toward the entrance—where a petite girl stood in the hallway, half her body peeking inside.

“…”

Kanbaru wanted to introduce me to…that girl? Who could it be, I’d never seen her before—no, of course I hadn’t if she wanted to introduce us. A junior from her time on the basketball team? But why would Kanbaru want to introduce me to the girl, a stranger? Looking at her, I got the feeling she was a first-year… She was too far for me to see her class pin, though.

“Cute, right?” Kanbaru said, as if that dispelled any and all doubts—but sure, that’s actually kind of how the world works.

“I know it’s pretty risky to introduce you to a cute girl, but what was I supposed to do? She asked me to introduce you herself. It was a bitter decision! Phew, good thing Senjogahara-senpai and Hanekawa-senpai happen to be out.”

“How exactly do you see me?”

“As being closer to human than beast.”

“Correct, but…”

It almost seemed like she’d timed her visit. Senjogahara and Hanekawa weren’t around, just so happening to be somewhere else today, but they had lunch in our classroom more often than not (in which case I was still excluded). Kanbaru couldn’t have been waiting for this moment, though—could she?

In any case, introduce me to a girl?

As you know, I don't have the most social of personalities and am not a big fan of meeting new people, whatever their age or gender, but I didn't expect the hyper-social Kanbaru, who loved meeting people she didn't know, to understand the subtleties at play here.

If I told her, Sorry, I'm not great at meeting people for the first time, I'd simply be met with, Ah! Then let's work on getting better at it!

Of course, I had "introduced" Kanbaru to someone two months earlier. I was more of an intermediary than an introducer, but I still felt guilty about bringing a rather dangerous individual into her life, even if I'd had no choice. And in fact, I'd also introduced her to my violent little sister Karen before that. So if Kanbaru wanted to introduce me to someone, I had to oblige her, whoever it might be. Seriously, her network of friends was so vast that it could be anyone.

Not that the girl waiting for Kanbaru's cue outside the classroom looked shady, but there was something…indescribable about her.

"Don't worry, my senior. Everything is going to be okay." Kanbaru grinned as if she'd detected my unease. "I made sure she took off her underwear."

"Go back to wherever it is you came from, and stay there!"

"Please, relax. I know I said I made her take off her underwear, but I'm just talking about her panties. She still has her bra on. You're the type who likes to take a girl's bra off himself, yes?"

"You come into our third-year classroom to say this?! I don't belong to any type or team!"

Given Kanbaru's fame at our school, the other students were already paying attention to our conversation□finding it odd that we were having one. Fortunately, no one around us seemed to have heard any of her perverted words□only my verbal abuse aimed at her. All I had to suffer through were the pointed looks of criticism for daring to act like her senior. In other words, it wasn't at all fortunate for me, but it was at least more fortunate than the world

discovering how much of a freak Kanbaru is.

“Huh? So you even want to take her panties off yourself? What a man. When it comes to girls, you really want to take the situation by the collar. Oh, but I don’t mean that in a BDSM way.”

“Yeah, I wish I could put a collar on you, and I don’t mean that in a BDSM way either.”

What I really wanted to put on her was a bell. But this was just Kanbaru’s idea of a joke, her way of saying hello. I’d gotten used to it by now.

“And, what’s with the girl? What’s her true identity? You want to introduce her to me? I’m not someone worth being introduced to. Do you know what Koyomi Araragi’s catchphrase is? The man who always has to introduce himself.”

“What a sad catchphrase. It’s not even catchy. Listen, she says she wants advice from you. That’s why I want you to meet her.”

“Advice, from me? Hold on, now it’s really getting ridiculous. Do you know how often people give the advice, ‘No matter who you ask for advice, just don’t ask Araragi’?”

“Really? People around here are giving that kind of advice? I’ll beat them up if they are.”

“Stop, stop, stop! I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” I found myself having to talk down Kanbaru, who was glaring at my classmates with an uncivil air about her. From their perspective, it must have looked like I was refusing to let the star athlete cut our conversation short and leave (further plummeting my favorability rating), but listen I saved all of you. It was all the more urgent since she’d proved a couple of months ago that her left hand still had the power to beat anyone up.

“So, u-um, what’s this about advice? I-I mean, I’m the Fire Sisters’ big brother after all, I’ve been known to give advice. I don’t mind one bit, she does have an introduction from you.”

“I haven’t heard the details myself, but it seems like it has

something to do with aberrations.”

“Wha…”

With aberrations?

Kanbaru saw my uneasy expression and said, “Yeah, it seems like she knows about them. She knew about my left hand, too, and about your blood. She said her uncle told her.”

“Her uncle…”

“She’s a first-year who just transferred into this school. I was shocked to hear it, but apparently she’s Mister Oshino’s niece. Her name’s Ogi Oshino.”

I turned my still-uneasy face to her for another look to look at half of Ogi Oshino. That’s when our eyes met for the first time.

Her eyes were black like they could suck you in.

004

“It’s funny, you see.”

“Funny.”

“It’s strange.”

“Strange.”

“In other words□it’s abnormal.”

“Abnormal. And□”

Errant.

Ogi Oshino pointed to a sketch in the notebook sitting open on top of my desk□and spoke in an unconcerned tone. I recalled facing Miss Gaen and doing something similar in August, but we used a tablet in that meeting, not a notebook. It’s not unusual for high schoolers to be using tablets these days, but maybe analog technology suited her better, as you might expect from Oshino’s niece.

There in the notebook was a structural layout of Naoetsu High. I could see why she’d show it to someone she’d only met for the first time; it was impressive, so good it made me wonder if she’d used professional tools to draw it. You could take it and post it by the entrance of the building if you wanted.

“It’s funny, you see,” Ogi repeated, still pointing to a specific part of the layout.

“…”

As we spoke, I split my time about evenly between looking at the diagram and at her□at her eyes. Those eyes that seemed like they

could suck me in.

It reminded me of how Miss Gaen once called herself “Mèmè Oshino’s little sister.” While at the time I wondered why it was little and not big sister—and thought that she said the most arbitrary things—I suppose there was at least someone real she was hinting at with that title. Come to think of it, of course Miss Gaen wouldn’t say anything arbitrary.

Still, why was that expert’s niece transferring into my school after he left our town in June? Kanbaru probably dismissed it with nothing more than a fate brings people together in the strangest ways, but as someone who’d experienced what happened with Hachikuji…

“Uh, are you listening to me?”

“Er, um…” I quickly gathered myself when she noticed how distracted I was. “Wh-Why don’t you sit down, Ogi-chan? I was just thinking it must be hard for you to explain all this when you’re standing. The chairs around there belong to kids who’re on the athletic grounds, and they probably won’t be coming back until the bell.”

I tried this excuse because I did feel guilty about sitting there and forcing an underclassman I was meeting for the first time to stand, but Ogi declined. Kanbaru never ended up sitting either, but the way Ogi declined was what amazed me.

“Sorry, but I’m afraid I’m a germophobe. I don’t want to sit in a chair when I don’t know who’s been using it.”

“…Is that so.”

A germophobe. Well, I thought, guess she’d never be able to live in that abandoned, no longer existent cram school the way her uncle had.

“I wouldn’t mind sitting on your lap, though.”

“Stop it.”

“Ooh, I bet you were thinking something naughty just now!”

Ogi clapped with glee. She was just goofing off like any high school freshman, but that wasn’t enough to do away with the unfathomable impression she gave off.

“You’re the one who said something naughty. You can stand there as punishment.”

“Man, you’re so strict.”

“And, what were we talking about? What’s funny again?”

“The bone on your arm that makes it numb if you hit it□nah, I don’t mean funny in a humerus way… Well, okay, I’m a transfer student, right? I’ve had to transfer schools a lot thanks to what you’d call family issues, or maybe personal issues. So often that I don’t even remember how many schools I’ve transferred into.”

“Huh… That must be tough. Now that I think about it, I guess Kanbaru transferred schools when she was in elementary, too…”

Kanbaru was now gone, by the way. She’d run off somewhere just as soon as she’d introduced me to Ogi. A busy young lady□or maybe she didn’t think she should listen to the details of this conversation?

“Yeah, transferring really must be tough. The entire environment around you changes.”

“True. But I’ve grown used to it. Anyway, every time I transfer into a new school, there’s something I do right away. What do you think that is?”

“What do I think… Say hello to the teachers?”

“I don’t always.”

“Wait, you don’t?”

“Well□I make diagrams like these.”

Ogi flipped through the pages of the notebook. I could tell it was new, but a lot of its pages had been filled with diagrams of the school's buildings. She'd depicted Naoetsu High in a fairly detailed way. There weren't just flat layouts, but three-dimensional ones, too—how had she drawn a bird's-eye view of the whole school? It almost looked like aerial photography.

"You could call it a habit of mine. I want to get a grasp on the school that's going to host me—do you think that's strange?"

"No, not really…"

To be honest, I did think it was pretty eccentric, but I actually knew two or so people who'd done something similar when they were starting at Naoetsu. I couldn't call it outright strange. What shocked me more was that those two or so people weren't the only ones.

I was just meeting Ogi for the first time, and she was the niece of that tricky dude Oshino. I'd been cautious, approaching her from a distance, so to speak, but I found this bit of odd behavior endearing.

"I like mysteries that take place in mansions," she said. "Just seeing a blueprint at the beginning of a book gets me interested. That's why every time I start life at a new school, I draw layouts like these—not that I'm expecting anyone to get murdered." She laughed, but it was hard to take it entirely as a quip because she somehow seemed so mysterious. If she'd told me that she was drawing a map for when a case did occur, I might have believed her.

"Huh… Let me take a look."

"Hm? At my panties?"

"No, at your notebook…"

It was just the kind of thing that Kanbaru's protégée would say. The former star's perverted ways were a bit of a secret thanks to the efforts of those who knew her best, so her influence on Ogi made me think that the two must be close (though given what she just said, Kanbaru instructing her to take off her underwear was just

talk). But then, how had Ogi gotten close to Kanbaru in the short time since she'd transferred to our school? Kanbaru did have a habit of making friends with everyone, though□and so I flipped through the notebook from cover to cover. Looking at the school that way, I realized how many of its facilities I knew nothing about despite being a student here for nearly three years. It was like I'd been shown just how halfhearted my time at Naoetsu High had been.

"…By the way, you're really good at drawing, Ogi. I'm not that good at reading maps, so I'm normally confused by this kind of thing, but your notebook makes me feel like I'm right there walking through the school."

"I am most humbly honored by your praise. In that case, I'm sure you understand□why I think something's funny."

"Hm? Like…" I didn't understand. I hadn't meant to flatter her, but now my compliment sounded phony. I forced myself to come up with something like an opinion. "The fact that there's too many buildings? Given the size of the student body, we could probably do away with one or□"

"That's not it. What are you, a fool?"

Harsh words, delivered in a polite tone. For a second I thought I'd angered her, but apparently not, as her expression was as beaming as ever□did her unique speech owe to transferring from one school to the next? There are cases where a horrible name to call someone in one place is a regular way to address them in others.

"That's just because of Japan's declining population. They must have needed this many in the past. We can infer that the large number of empty classrooms is simply the result of the number of current students being lower compared to when the school came into being. That's not what I'm talking about□this right here is."

"Where?"

"Here."

Ogi took her notebook back, opened it to a different page, and

pointed at the same place she was pointing a few moments earlier. But nothing there struck me as particularly funny.

“The layout here is strange.” Fed up with waiting for an answer from a fool, which is to say from me, Ogi began explaining.

“Strange, or maybe unnatural just look at the floors right above and below it,” she said, flipping between the adjacent pages. “They have rooms here like they should, right? It’s funny that this one room is missing in between them.”

“Funny…” I looked at the layout once again, this time with these preconceptions and prejudices in mind, but still didn’t see it. “But the third floor does have this room. The AV room…”

“That’s because the layout is wrong. Wrong, or well, I did draw these to reflect reality, but the actual AV room isn’t this long. You must have noticed that it’s drawn about one-and-a-half times longer compared to the surrounding rooms.”

“Hmmm.”

True, maybe it did look that way compared to the classrooms around it the AV room I’d used a number of times during my time as a student wasn’t this large. It still didn’t seem like an impermissibly large error, though… And it wasn’t as if Ogi had drawn her plans with the kind of serious measuring tools they used on a construction site. She’d probably overlooked a classroom on one of the floors, or got her units wrong, or made some other kind of error that manifested in the AV room getting a little longer.

“What’s that? You’re not doubting me, are you? Oh, that really hurts.”

“I know you don’t like me enough to be wounded by me doubting you.”

“No, I’m quite enamored with you I have a thing for easily tricked fools.”

Casually calling me a fool again… It’d be one thing if she was contemptuous, the way Senjogahara once was, but given Ogi’s

smile, I couldn't tell if she was being guileless or malicious. It was causing cognitive dissonance.

"I don't make mistakes. If this is a mistake, I'll strip down and use my wide-open arms in place of a ruler to remeasure the entire school."

"Are you always so careless about making promises?"

Me, I'd never promise such a thing, no matter how confident I was.

"It isn't a mistake…" Ogi paused and chuckled. "If this were a mystery novel, a floor plan not lining up with reality would, in most cases, mean there's a hidden room. Now, what should we do? What if there was enough space here for an entire room stuffed full of treasure?"

"Hidden treasure at a school? And I doubt it'd become ours just because we found it."

"You need to dream a little□kids studying for exams turn into such realists."

"Even if it wasn't a mistake on your part when you were drawing these, wouldn't it make sense to assume it's a mistake on the builders' part? In other words, it's dead space just buried in concrete□"

I didn't recall there being any concrete wall next to the AV room□but if you asked me what it did look like, I couldn't tell you. All you really need to know as a student is the location of your homeroom.

"Maybe. Of course, that would be best. No, it'd be best if it were stuffed full of treasure, but I'd be fine if it were stuffed full of concrete. But if…" Saying something improper, or imprudent, seemed to excite Ogi so much that she could barely hold herself back. "If this is some kind of aberrational phenomenon□we ought to look into it before anyone gets hurt."

"…"

My honest impression was that she was jumping to conclusions. Yes, it was strange that the layout didn't line up with reality, but you couldn't go straight from that to an aberrational phenomenon. Even her hidden-room theory was more believable though maybe you could find an aberration like that if you dug through the literature.

And anyway, Shinobu would notice if there was something like that at our school in fact, how could Oshino not have caught on as early as spring break? Yeah, he'd definitely say, I don't like it when people blame everything on aberrations as soon as something strange happens.

I couldn't dismiss her opinion out of hand, though, precisely because she was Oshino's niece and because the two or so people who'd surveyed every inch of Naoetsu High when they entered, namely Tsubasa Hanekawa and Hitagi Senjogahara, hadn't said a thing about this dead space.

If it really existed whether it had anything to do with aberrations or not Ogi had spotted something unusual immediately after transferring in like it was obvious, when not only Tsubasa Hanekawa, who knew everything, and Hitagi Senjogahara, at the height of her desperate self-preservation, hadn't.

This fact no, it was only a possibility at this point, but I wasn't so dry that my curiosity wasn't piqued by the possibility.

"Even if it's an aberration, we don't know that it's harmful…but I suppose I do agree, we should look into it just in case," I said, prudently and a little too turgidly. I didn't want her to think that I was hopping straight onto an underclassman's proposal; I wanted to keep up the appearances I no longer cared to with Kanbaru.

"Aw, that's great. I knew I could count on Araragi-senpai. Please come and meet me today after school, then. Visiting a third-year classroom makes me nervous, you know?"

How cute of her, and unlike Kanbaru. She was effectively telling a senior she'd only just met to come to her, which was rude, but I didn't even notice.

“Okay, I just need to come to your classroom? But this can’t go too late, okay? I might get assassinated if someone mistakenly thinks that I’m off having fun after school with one of my juniors.”

“I won’t keep you long, of course. Maybe fifteen minutes? That should be more than enough time to realize it’s nothing. It’ll only take a minute.”

Or fifteen, Ogi said, looking cheery. Seeing her act this way made me think that all the talk about floor plans and aberrations was nothing more than an excuse. Maybe this girl, at a brand-new school where she didn’t know people, just wanted to get along with an indirect acquaintance like me, I thought conceitedly—of course, the truth was something else.

Fifteen minutes wasn’t anywhere near enough for our investigation—and I still didn’t know how long it would take.

005

I went to visit Ogi after school like I'd said, and from there we briskly walked over to the building where the AV room was located. Ogi took the lead. This made me feel like I was the transfer student and she was showing me around school. She talked to me about all kinds of things on our way there—so I wouldn't get bored, I assumed. Things like "the law in serialized manga where editors write really long copy for titles they're not confident about (on the other hand, copy for popular manga is short)" or "the law where the more expensive something gets, the slower it goes (the speed at which food is served at a restaurant, paying the bill, the delivery of goods, wrapping a present)," stuff she came up with herself. It seemed that she was a fan of laws. Seeing her talk on and on made me think there was indeed something about her that took after Mèmè Oshino. There was also something about it that made her feel like a fresh high school girl. I savored both the nostalgia and the freshness of it as we arrived at our destination. And at our destination, the third floor of the school building in question, next to the AV room, sure enough.

There it was.

A classroom.

"See, Ogi? Take a look at that. There's a regular classroom right here. You overlooked it, that's all. In other words, you added the space taken up by this classroom to your drawing of the AV room. Now it's clear that you made a mistake. So I think it's time for you to strip down and use your wide-open arms in place of a ruler to remeasure the entire school. Maybe I'll have you measure my body while you're at it. I feel like I've grown lately," I didn't actually say.

After all, it was far stranger for there to be a classroom here than not—in a building full of special classrooms, why was there a regular one, like it had sprouted up out of nowhere? It was so out of

place that it left an impression, and I absolutely would've remembered it. Even if I didn't remember it looking at a floor plan, I definitely would after seeing it in person.

"Hmm? What could this classroom be? It wasn't here when I visited the area to draw my layout. What a big, old mystery," Ogi said, flatly for some reason—grinning as always. It almost looked like she was enjoying this.

"Anyway…let's go inside."

It was the wrong decision. It seems obvious that I should have stepped back, come up with a plan, and returned. I should have drawn on Hanekawa's wisdom and consulted Shinobu, who was sleeping in my shadow—but I wanted to show my underclassman that I was reliable, so I recklessly opened the door and walked inside.

Like a fool.

From the outside, it seemed like no one was there, but the door was unlocked, making it easy to enter—no one, indeed.

Just rows of desks and chairs, as well as a teacher's desk and a locker for cleaning supplies.

An empty classroom—nothing odd about that. The fact is, the unticking clock and the gym being visible from the windows already stood out, but I had yet to notice. It certainly wasn't stuffed full of treasure, and as far as I could see, it was a plain classroom. Assuming I'd just remembered wrong and that it'd always been right here, I felt relieved, not noticing—not noticing a single thing I should have.

Ogi entered the classroom as well.

Then closed the door.

"And that brings us to now…"

I looked at the clock above the blackboard, then compared it to my wristwatch—noting the disparity between the time my watch

displayed and the (stopped) time on the hanging clock.

My watch was operating like nothing had happened, so it was possible that the clock on the wall was out of batteries, but Ogi hadn't dismissed that possibility out of hand. If time was stopped inside the classroom, to some degree that explained why the doors wouldn't budge and the windows wouldn't break. A class where time had stopped—or no, maybe I ought to call it a class where time didn't pass?

"I guess the question is how fixed in time it really is," Ogi said, facing the blackboard again. It wasn't a ballpoint pen in her hands now, but a regular implement for writing on a blackboard, which is to say chalk. "That's right, blackboard chalk. But I'm old-fashioned, so I prefer to call it slate."

With that, she drew a line across the blackboard.

While the ballpoint pen had failed to leave a mark on it, this time she managed to draw a clear white line on the board.

"Wh… Whoa," I exclaimed, not so much at the experiment result showing that you could draw on the blackboard with chalk, but at the level of activity with which Ogi performed test after test. Weren't people normally more cautious in a sealed environment like ours?

"Hahaha. Looks like chalk works. I wonder what the logic is here. What about this?" Ogi then held the chalk sideways to draw a thick line. It was a forbidden way of using chalk that consumed a piece in the blink of an eye. Still, she could draw that way. Her thick line bent back and forth as she drew a love umbrella.

From there, she held the chalk vertically again and wrote "Koyomi" and "Ogi" under each side of the umbrella.

"Hahaha! Just messing around!"

"This really isn't the time for that, Ogi…"

Oops. If anything, this wasn't the time for me to be getting ticked off by an underclassman's silly joke—I should've been coming up

with my own experiments, my own trials and errors to figure out how to escape from the locked room.

“Will the lights turn on?” We hadn’t tried the switches yet since there was more than enough light coming through the window—but I tried flicking them all on. All of them at the same time, in our situation, showed how slovenly I am, but the fluorescent tubes on the ceiling lit up anyway. “So there’s electricity… I guess this place functions as a classroom, at least?”

I wasn’t sure… Still, if it was getting electricity, then as a last-ditch escape method we could use an outlet to light a spark and cause a fire. Tsukihi had done something similar in the past to help Karen (quite literally the Fire Sisters), but while it was probably safer than an explosion, we ran the risk of suffocating if we started a fire in an enclosed space, making it an honest-to-goodness last-ditch method.

“Is there a danger,” I muttered, “of us suffocating even if we didn’t? I wonder how fast a human being consumes oxygen. We’d run out eventually if this goes on for too long…”

“I don’t know about that one. This is a classroom, after all—it might be a locked room, but I doubt we’re sealed off from even the atmosphere. Maybe if someone used tape to trap us in here, but enough air should be seeping through the window frames and all to keep two humans alive.”

“Oh… That’s a relief.”

Though I said I was relieved, I noticed that Ogi had used the words locked room. She probably just happened to choose them, of course, but maybe she was right.

Locked room might be a more fitting term for our situation than enclosed space if we weren’t in an airtight environment.

Sheesh.

Guided by a blueprint to a hidden room like something out of a mystery novel—we now found ourselves in a locked room. Not a bad setup, but it had a lamentable lack of a detective.

“What do you think, Araragi-senpai?”

“What do I think? Well…what am I supposed to?”

I had to admit that a floor plan that didn’t seem quite right and my inability to recall the classroom could be put down to some misunderstanding, but there was no logical explanation for ending up in a locked room. My only choice was to explain it illogically, as an absurdity.

“But Ogi. If an aberration is doing this what kind of aberration is it? Is there some aberration that locks people in a classroom?”

“Hard to say. Unlike my uncle, I’m not versed in that old-timey lore. I only know major aberrations, the kinds that show up in manga and movies,” she either played dumb or acted modest with such unfathomable snickering that it made me think she actually did know. It was the same when I talked to Oshino I couldn’t help but distrust him. Seeing my suspicious eyes on her, Ogi continued.

“But I’m sure there has to be some kind of aberration that keeps you from leaving a locked room. The type you hear about most doesn’t let you leave until the next visitor shows up and you trick them into walking in so that you can leave. That sort of thing.”

Yes, I’d heard that kind of ghost story so were we stuck in this classroom until someone else showed up? No, that couldn’t be right, it wasn’t as if anyone trapped inside had left when we walked in. Even if this was an aberration, it was a different type of phenomenon.

“Ah, I was so afraid a fool like you might go along with that hypothesis.” Ogi smiled gently she was cutest whenever she called me a fool, but what was it? I kept missing my chance to scold her. “I can say this much, though. For every aberration, there is a reason you see.”

“…”

Wasn’t that another one of Oshino’s lines? In which case, the inference was that figuring this reason out would help us escape…

“Still, why’d we be unable to leave a classroom? And why should a clock stop the way—”

“Maybe the time its hands stopped on is the key? I mean—doesn’t the ridiculous time they’ve stopped on feel odd?”

The clock hanging on the wall read a little before six—5:58, to be exact. As for my wristwatch, it said 4:45. Ogi and I must have started our investigation at around 3:30—so an hour and fifteen minutes had already passed since the onset of our abnormal situation.

“Even if that clock stopping a little before six is the key, is that supposed to be a.m. or p.m.? You can’t tell with an analog clock.”

“I think it’s p.m.—judging from the view outside.”

“Hm? Wait, really? If anything…”

Referencing the scene beyond the windows hadn’t occurred to me. While I was quietly impressed by Ogi, I didn’t want to betray my lack of insight to an underclassman, forcing me to find faults in her argument. I keenly hated how small of a person I was.

“Wouldn’t it be darker out if it was six in the evening? At this time of the year—you might not know this because you’re a transfer student, Ogi, but the sun around here sets pretty early once it’s October.”

“It does? Huh, I learn so much from talking to you. I still think it’s 6 p.m., though—look at the direction of the shadow cast by the gym. The sun would have to be in the west for it to look that way.”

“Mmm…okay. But we’re facing—wait, no. We shouldn’t base our direction off of this building’s position since we’re seeing the wrong thing from the window. We ought to use the gym’s position instead. And it faces east-west,” I muttered, recalling Ogi’s gym page—fine. In that case, yes, the clock was showing 5:58 p.m.

“Six in the evening is when school closes for the day, right? Heh, so we’ll be able to leave in time—oh, or maybe it’s still 3:30 outside if the clock is stopped?”

“That would mean my wristwatch is malfunctioning here. This is getting annoying…”

“What’re you talking about, time travel is a walk in the park for you,” Ogi said□hm?

Hold on, she shouldn’t know anything about the time travel stuff, it happened after Oshino left town□

“Details aside, we sure are in a bind, aren’t we? If time isn’t moving forward, that means night is never going to come. In other words, you won’t be able to rely on that nightwalker…er, Miss Shinobu.”

“Mm. Oh, I guess not.”

Shinobu Oshino, the vampire who lives in my shadow, formerly known as the Aberration Slayer, is like a natural predator to any and all aberrational phenomena□an aberration who eats other aberrations. If she could make an appearance, she’d surely consume whatever we were facing, maybe even the whole classroom. But it was quite a lot of work luring out someone nocturnal like her at the awkward hour of “just before six in the evening.” It wasn’t impossible…but there was no telling how many donuts she’d demand in return.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Even if time isn’t flowing in this classroom, it’s moving for me□so maybe it is inside my shadow for Shinobu, too?”

“We don’t know for sure if time is flowing for you. It could be that only your will is active, while time has stopped for your body. I mean, I hope that our physiologies aren’t moving through time.”

“Why not?”

“What’re we going to do if we want to pee?”

“…”

A serious problem, indeed. I was doing my best not to think about it, but more than hunger or thirst, that was the most pressing issue□if anything, though, Ogi kept calm as she said this.

“I’ve heard all about your heroics, but even if you’re known as our era’s Junichiro Tanizaki, you couldn’t possibly be into watching a girl pee and vice versa.”

“Who are you calling our era’s Tanizaki?”

“If time really has stopped in this classroom right before six□why would that be?” asked Ogi, putting us back on track.

“What do you mean, why…”

“Let me rephrase that. Six in the evening, time to leave school. What meaning does this phenomenon hold, where two students are trapped in a classroom at the exact time when they ought to be leaving?”

“Not going home, even when it’s time to…”

She was right. It did seem odd□in fact, as far as school-related aberrations go, the type meant to teach some sort of lesson was the most common□like attacking students who loiter on the premises.

“Is this what you’d call detention?” said Ogi.

“Detention…”

Hm. Why was I getting hung up on that word? The reason wasn’t coming to me, but I got the vague sense that it meant something.

It felt like it stirred my memories□detention?

“Have you ever had to stay after school for some remedial session, Araragi-senpai? Hahaha. I can’t say I have. You might be surprised to know, but I’m on the smarter side.”

“Can’t say I have, either…”

“Oh, wow.”

Though Ogi acted impressed, it wasn’t smarts that kept me from doing detention or remedial work; I’d just skip any. Not that I could now, since I was hoping to take college entrance exams…but yes,

last year or the year before that…especially when I was a first-year□a first-year?

“What’s the matter? Your fate doesn’t look well□I mean, your face.”

“Hm? Really? Sorry, I was just…feeling dizzy.”

“No need to apologize. No need at all. Being burdened with a helpless underclassman must be taxing. Would you like to sit down on one of those chairs? I’m sure you’re not a germophobe like me□but if you insist, I can lend you my lap.”

“Where exactly on your lent lap would I sit? If I borrowed it when you’re not sitting, that would be a gymnastic formation. Seriously…”

I was starting to get used to Ogi’s teasing. As her senior, I should’ve been putting her in her place (right, before it was too late as with Kanbaru), but I honestly did feel dizzy with a slight headache. I took Ogi’s suggestion and decided to sit down for a moment□not on her lap, of course, but in one of the classroom’s many chairs. I could see this going for a long time, so there was no point in overexerting myself now. I moved, pulled out a chair, and sat in it.

“Why did you sit there?” she asked as soon as I did, or maybe even a little before I did.

Huh, what? Why? She was the one who’d suggested it.

“No, that’s not what I mean□this classroom is full of chairs, so I wanted to know why you picked that one.”

“…”

Why’d there be a reason? I just felt like it□I thought of saying, but now that she’d asked, I couldn’t figure out the answer. If I was sitting down because I was tired, it made the most sense to pick the closest chair□so why get moving, wind my way through the desks, pass up a number of other chairs, and finally sit in the fourth seat from the front, third from the right?

I just felt like it was of course the only answer I could give…

“Felt like it,” Ogi said. “You just felt like□that was the easiest chair to sit in? It looked the most comfortable?”

“I don’t think there’s much difference in how comfortable any of these chairs are… It’s just□”

“Just what?”

“Like I felt used to sitting here.”

I myself thought that was an odd thing to say. Stumped as I was for an answer, used to□in a room I was visiting for the first time? Sure, if I need to rest in our classroom, even though all of the chairs are basically the same□I might unconsciously pick the most familiar seat, my own, to sit in…but this wasn’t even close to being our classroom.

“Is that really true?”

“Huh? What? What’d you just say, Ogi?”

“Oh, I’m just throwing every possibility at the wall□and I just realized that maybe this isn’t the first time you’ve come here. When you needed to take a seat, could you have gone straight to a specific chair because you’ve sat in it before?”

“…Sorry, that one’s too out there for me,” I replied with a half-smile□yeah, that didn’t seem like a hypothesis worth serious consideration. Ogi was playing around and teasing me again. “I didn’t even know there was a classroom here until now□”

“It wasn’t here when I did my first survey, either. But it appeared when I came with you□so it strikes me as completely natural that it has something to do with you.”

“Hm… Is that what it means.”

To be honest, I wondered if Ogi wasn’t the cause since she had discovered the aberrational phenomenon□but from her perspective, I was the suspicious one.

“You even said it yourself, Araragi-senpai. The view out of the

window seemed familiar to you."

"Huh? Did I?"

"You did. Right when we entered, before we noticed we were trapped."

I didn't remember this—but I must have if she was so certain. I must've forgotten once I realized I was in a locked room.

Still seated, I took another look out the window—where I could see the gym. At our angle, from this floor of this building, we shouldn't have been able to—and the view from my seat was a little different from the one by the window. I couldn't see the roof anymore, and instead mountains loomed off in the distance, and it did seem…

My memories.

They were being stirred.

"Hm… I remember seeing this. But…"

"But?" echoed Ogi, more cross-examining than following up—she'd gotten close to my seat without my noticing. She hadn't made a sound, and she was so close that I found myself a little flustered. I started to talk, as if to gloss over the situation.

"Well… I wouldn't say I feel particularly nostalgic. Actually, it's kind of unpleasant…"

"Unpleasant? Really? I think it's a nice view—this location, this situation. We were saying that despite being on the third floor, it felt more like the fourth or fifth floor, but it's definitely the fifth at this height."

"Fifth floor…"

Fifth floor—in which case.

Right… I needed to rethink this. The view was an impossibility from this floor of this building. What if this was the fifth floor, and I was in a classroom in a building that faced the gym—what if I was

where I could see this?

I was familiar with such a classroom.

Fukado.

“…!”

“Uh oh. What’s the matter it’s not like something came to you? Sorry if I was insensitive,” Ogi said like she was apologizing. No, she wasn’t apologizing, she was savoring this. She’d changed positions again at some point and now stood directly behind me. “Did you just recall something you didn’t want to recall?”

“No, that’s…not it. I haven’t recalled anything.”

Indeed, I hadn’t. Because I’d never forgotten it to begin with how could I ever forget what happened? I bit my lips, went silent, and stuck my hand inside the desk to search inside the seat I chose, claiming it was comfortable. The owner had to be pretty averse to studying at home; it was crammed with textbooks. I pulled one out and examined its back cover. There it said: Year 1, Class 3 Araragi.

“Guh…”

I covered my mouth and instantly moved to hide the name but was too late. Ogi spotted it from over my shoulder.

“Wait a sec. Did that textbook just now say ‘Araragi’ on it? That’s funny, that’s strange, why could that be why would your textbook be here in this classroom? Did you slip it in while I wasn’t looking? Please, don’t you know outside items aren’t allowed in this classroom?”

Just kidding, it’s not like this is a test, there’s no such rule, Ogi added slimily somehow without ditching her easy tone. A test. That’s right, a test. Each word she uttered stirred my memories and stung them not like a rose’s thorns, but like a porcupine’s quills.

Now desperate, I asked her: “Ogi… What do you know?”

“Nothing. You’re the one who knows. For example ”

Ogi reached for the seat next to mine. From the desk, she extracted a random textbook—then flipped it over and read the name on it. Year 1, Class 3. Toishima.

“You must know this Toishima person, too?”

“Yeah… I…”

I did.

Suisen Toishima. Everyone called her Sui for short—was she in the flower arrangement club? She was always laughing and smiling, no matter what you asked her or said to her. Didn’t her friends always caution her that laughing with her mouth wide open wasn’t ladylike? If anything, though, the boys liked her for her hearty laughter. The teachers did too. Hadn’t she been like a savior, in fact, for teachers who liked to joke during class? Right, and she was so serious about seat reassignments…and seemed pretty unhappy in this one, fourth from the front, second from the right, a half-assed position. Sitting right next to someone who looked so dissatisfied was bewildering at first, but then I came to realize it was a special front-row seat for hearing her laughter.

“She wore her hair in French braids… I knew just how long it took to do that because my little sister is like a walking hair catalog, and I always thought about the amount of work it must take her every morning. I never brought it up, though…”

“You sure do know a lot about this Miss Toishima.”

“No… Any classmate would know that much. I—”

I hadn’t known anything—after all.

This was back when I hadn’t—there were a lot of things I hadn’t known.

“Then what about Fukado? What kind of person sat at the desk I flipped over?”

It seemed that Ogi, too, had seen the name on that textbook. So she had, but not brought it up until now—well, that wasn’t odd. It’s not

as if the name had anything to do with her.

“Shimono Fukado. Now her, I was scared of… Not because she did anything in particular. I think she was harmless. I guess she was just ridiculously good at putting forth a personality? To be blunt, she acted cute. She came to school wearing the kinds of fancy hair accessories you only ever see in anime, she’d get told not to all the time, and she’d get this look on her face like, ‘I don’t understand why you’re so mad at me.’ It was obvious that she knew… Maybe because she thought that being smart or a good student wasn’t cute, she’d do badly on tests on purpose—I won’t say she played dumb, but it was kind of like that. I think her goal for the future was ‘becoming a mom’—even an oaf like me could easily tell that ‘becoming a bride’ was the more girlish answer, so maybe she meant it. But when she smiled, her eyes never did, as far as I know.”

Damn. I was talking too much. I couldn’t stop once I’d started, though. It was like the floodgates had opened and the words were spilling forth—hadn’t I decided not to think about it anymore, even if I couldn’t forget it?

I’d thought I’d decided.

Why? Why was Year 1, Class 3—my classroom from two years earlier, here now? Just before six. 5:58 p.m. Right before it was time to go home. We needed to go home—but couldn’t.

This classroom—that no one could leave.

“Ogi? Is there anything around that might tell us the date?”

“The date?”

“Yeah. Like what today—or no, what month and day it is in this classroom. I need to know.”

“Well, it’s right there on the blackboard. Just take a look.”

Ogi was directly behind me now for the third time. Drawing her face close to mine, she put her arm around my shoulder and pointed at the blackboard. At its right-hand corner. Why hadn’t I

noticed until now? “Today’s” date in this classroom was right there—along with the names of those who were on day duty.

July 15. Thursday. Koma / Marizumi.

“…!”

“Oh, so today’s July fifteenth—now it makes sense for it to be so bright outside. Hmm, so then, did something happen in this classroom—Year 1, Class 3, I suppose—at around six on Thursday, July fifteenth? Something regretful, I’m sure. And that regret must’ve borne fruit as this aberration,” remarked Ogi, broadly, as if none of it really mattered—I almost found myself protesting and saying it was more serious than that, but I couldn’t. The biggest reason being that I didn’t want to yell at a girl who was my underclassman—but also, she was completely on the mark when I thought about it.

What happened in this classroom on that day—really didn’t matter, which is exactly why it was so unbearable. Who knew what the space was being used for now. An afterschool class council meeting held on July fifteenth in the Year 1, Class 3 room, located in the center of the fifth floor of that building facing the gym. A gathering of the class council that might be termed a trial. There we condemned one another over a certain incident—asserting our own innocence and imputing guilt to others. There were objections, and there was the right to remain silent. There were testimonies, and there was perjury. And I—Koyomi Araragi of Year 1, Class 3, sat at the center of this tumultuous trial.

Right.

Wasn’t that when it started?

When I first started to say it?

“I don’t make friends—making friends would lower my intensity as a human,” Ogi preempted me. Preempted, as if to block my escape route. To chase me down a dead end.

Her face, still to the side of mine, drew even closer. Our cheeks

almost touched now. She wasn't just close, her dainty chin was resting on top of my shoulder.

"That was your favorite line□though it seems you've stopped saying it ever since Tsubasa Hanekawa came into your life. Ah, we really do change through meeting people, don't we□so let me ask this, out of curiosity. How did you change when you were in this class? How did Fukado, how did Toishima, how did Koma, how did Marizumi□change you?"

"Change…m□"

"I've heard your personality changed quite a bit between middle school and high school. Could the reason for that possibly be found in this classroom?"

Who told her that? Well, some people did know, of course□but this was the past, and the only ones who'd bother digging it up now were the Fire Sisters.

"What happened, Araragi-senpai? Here in this classroom. That day. That time," Ogi whispered the words like she was cornering me.

One of her arms was around my neck, and I felt like I was being throttled□and understood what people meant when they spoke of being hanged with a silk noose.

"Let's talk about it□Koyomi Araragi," she muttered, murmured. "You'll feel better once you do. No matter how awful a memory might be, talk about it and it'll turn into nothing more than a tale."

"A tale…"

"Don't worry, I'll listen. I might not look it, but I'm someone you can really talk to."

"…"

I did everything to maintain my composure, even then□even under those circumstances, I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of my junior. How vain am I?

“We can’t leave,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“We can’t leave—we aren’t allowed to exit this classroom until we figure out the culprit. That’s what we did—that’s what we forced upon ourselves in that class council. And as unbelievable as this sounds…I was the chairman.”

006

If you were to ask me what kind of person Koyomi Araragi was during his first year of high school, I guess a self-evaluation finds someone less difficult than I am now, while a self-examination finds someone more honest and straightforward than I am now. I also hadn't been attacked by a vampire, of course, so I could state with confidence that I was a human day and night.

Now, then. Naoetsu Private High School, which I attend and which Ogi transferred into, is quite the prep school—we even have classes on Saturdays, and it'd be hard to call it an average high school in that sense. The exam to get in is fairly hard, too. Maybe it was a miracle that I overcame this barrier—no, "miracle" might be going too far. It'd be more accurate to say that I passed thanks to some sort of mistake. I mean, I had to pay a pretty high price to compensate for the mistake of doing whatever it took to get in—it wasn't long before I couldn't keep up with Naoetsu High's over-the-top curriculum. From the time you're a freshman, you're in classes that are preparing you for college entrance exams. No fun allowed, and that was a pretty big culture shock for me. Still, I'd gotten in (due to some sort of mistake or not), and in those days I thought I should accept my fate and stick it out. Yes, until the end of our first term, right before summer break. Until just after finals, I guess I should say? Well, whatever the case, until what happened after school on July fifteenth.

July fifteenth. The day I gave up on being serious, on being an honest and straightforward student—and decided to sink to being what Tsubasa Hanekawa would call a delinquent. The truth is, I just became your standard washout. Even if that day and its events never happened, I'd have fallen behind before long.

In any case, on July fifteenth two years ago, I finished ignoring my incomprehensible classes (I wasn't even trying to keep up. I mean, I was leaving my textbooks at school) and, mentally exhausted, was

getting ready to make my way home. It's almost summer break, it's almost summer break, it's almost summer break, I chanted in my mind like a spell—not that summer break boded well, considering how much homework we'd be getting.

I'd somehow survived our first term, but couldn't stand the thought of going on that way until graduation. In fact, I hadn't made it through first term yet—and in the end, wouldn't.

Shadows. Three of them—blocked my path as I walked down the hallway. Feeling drained, barely noticing them in time, I almost collided with them.

"Araragi," a voice called.

When I finally lifted my downturned eyes, I saw three of my classmates.

"Got a second?"

It was Arikure who said this as I stood there—Biwa Arikure. A mean girl who seemed to find a way to complain about everything. To be honest, a type I don't really like—and I doubt any boys had a favorable view of her. She always had her hands in her skirt pockets, and it wasn't some blatant attempt to act bad. It was to protect her hands—when she did take them out, they were gloved, still fully protected. Something about her wanting to become a pianist—good thing you can't hear her personality, you might badmouth her, but apparently, she was reasonably accomplished. Not that I'd ever heard her play, but rumors aren't always just rumors.

In any case, getting stopped by a girl I didn't like when I felt so drained was pretty rough.

"Sorry, there's something important I have to do now, called going home…"

"What, you think you're better than me?" she said as if to pick a fight—I didn't think I was, but she must've thought I was messing with her. That's one part of me that continues to stay the same.

Two girls stood behind Arikure—whose nickname, I believe, was Arikui, or anteater—and one of them, Kijikiri, was silent. In fact, spaced out somehow, she wouldn't even look at me. That's the kind of person she was, proceeding at her own pace, or maybe laidback. Sometimes she'd stay behind for no reason, and come to think of it, even be absent without telling anyone. Hoka Kijikiri was a capricious girl with a strange way of life—people even said she lived in a different world. That's why I was surprised. Why would she team up with Arikure to block my path? Not that she'd strayed from her indifferent stance, just standing there and looking away.

"No, I really do have to get home. I have an obligation to. Going home is one of my three great obligations. I haven't told anyone else, but my little sister in sixth grade got herself mixed up in a huge fight—or actually, stirred up a huge fight, and I can't afford to take my eyes off of her."

"Huh? Stop with the jokes already. I hate that kind of stuff more than anything," Arikure complained like I'd truly offended her—it wasn't a joke, but to be fair, my beloved little sisters had yet to be known as the Fire Sisters of Tsuganoki Second Middle School. My words must've come off as nothing more than a lie.

"Now, now. Calm down," said the last girl, Tone, to soothe her, as if she were a wild mare. "We're sorry to bother you when you're busy, but please come back to the classroom with us. We won't take that much of your time. You'd be a great help."

Won't take that much of your time. Those words ended up being a lie, but I'm sure she didn't mean to deceive me.

Jiku Tone. Her nickname was Icing—not the frozen kind, but after the character for "sugar" in her name (stay with me, but Year 1 Class 3 also had a boy, Higuma, with the character for "ice"). She always looked happy, infectiously so. The healing type, to use a once-fashionable term. Her name and nickname suggested that she liked sweets, but she was an all-round glutton. While she never seemed unhappy, according to herself she was happiest when she was eating. A regular customer at all-you-can-eat buffets.

"…"

I knew the basics about each girl, having studied hard alongside them for an entire term, but wasn't aware that they operated as a group. Actually, I think this was the first time I'd seen them together.

As I wondered what could have brought them together, Arikure ran out of patience. "You're being so irritating, Araragi," she accused angrily. "Are you coming or not? Decide already. It's fine with me if you don't."

"I will. That's all you want, right?"

If I were a little wiser, I probably wouldn't have agreed—I did sense the menacing mood. I had yet to give up on my life as a high school student, though. Why these three? I wondered, but looking back on it, what a good team they made. The unpleasant, pardon me, the aggressive Arikure in front; Kijikiri behind her, untouchable, or simply hard to communicate with; the healing Tone. A lineup you'd rather not face in a fight, handling them the wrong way could hobble the rest of my high school days. I ended up crippling most of my future as a high schooler anyway, but my only option at the time was to go with them.

We returned to the classroom, Year 1 Class 3's, on the fifth floor of the school building facing the gym. Two students stood by the door, waiting for us, and that's when it all made sense. One boy and one girl, and the boy wasn't the problem here. The issue was the girl glaring at me with open hostility—a sharp stare as if her parents' murderer stood behind me.

Her name was Sodachi Oikura. While she wanted people to call her Euler, they actually called her How Much. This was of course because her name, Oikura, could also be read as "how much"—which was quite fitting for someone who looked at you so appraisingly. Not that we were on good enough terms to call each other by any nicknames—if anything, I was her enemy.

She was the class president. These days, that could only refer to Tsubasa Hanekawa, globally speaking (at least for me), but her reputation had yet to spread so far. Hence…

“Class President Oikura,” I said, judging that the situation called for her title. “What’re you doing here? Are you the one who asked for me?”

“Hurry up and go inside. Everyone’s waiting for you,” she replied coldly and entered the classroom. The boy with her followed behind—if you’re curious, this was Tsuma Shui, our class vice president. If you took dead seriousness and molded it into a high school freshman, the model Naoetsu High pupil, you’d get him. I touched on how Oikura was with me, but she was harsh overall, and I personally saw him as more of a class president than her. According to him, though, he was more of “the bureaucratic type” who preferred to play “a supporting role.” What kind of high schooler is the bureaucratic type, I thought and didn’t believe him at first, but he stayed in Oikura’s shadow during that entire first term, helping her lead the class—so I guess that sort of talent exists. I did see him just once at an arcade, where he moved with incredible precision for a dancing game. I felt like I’d seen a side of him I shouldn’t have, but ever since I couldn’t hate him even if he wasn’t the type I got along with. I carefully avoided any conflict with Oikura partly for his sake, but I bet he barely noticed me…

“You heard her, Araragi. She said to come in. Go,” Arikure prompted me. I shrugged and entered the classroom as I was told. Oikura never answered the question, but she must’ve asked the trio to fetch me—instead of doing so herself. Why? Because we would’ve gotten in a fight, and she wanted to maintain her dignity? In any case, it made perfect sense if she was the mind behind the well-selected team. What gave me pause, though, were her words—everyone’s waiting for you. What did that mean? Was I the kind of hero who could make everyone eagerly await me? Who was “everyone” in the first place?

I went in and learned that “everyone” was quite literal—every last member of Year 1, Class 3 was assembled there.

007

“Huh. Everyone so the full class,” Ogi said. “It’s abandoned now, but every seat was filled back then. I see, I see. Time waits for no man, a decade can pass in the blink of an eye.”

“Yeah… Wait, it’s only been two years, not ten, and technically, the seats belonging to the trio who’d come for me were empty. Also, the class vice president Shui was sitting, but Oikura was standing at the teacher’s desk.”

“On top of it?”

“She wasn’t that eccentric a class president, okay? Anyway, standing at the desk, she declared, ‘Now that we’ve secured our deserter, I’d like to begin this special session of our class council.’”

“Deserter? How harsh Miss Oikura must’ve been pretty scary. I’d never poke fun at her. She’s still here as a third-year, right?”

“Yeah. I guess…”

I tried to keep it vague because I really didn’t want to discuss it. I put us right back on track taking us back to the past.

“A special session of the class council isn’t normally something you’d do after school, but Oikura was charismatic enough to make it happen.”

“Huh… Still, it’s weird. You didn’t know about this meeting until just before it happened? That must be why they sent someone to get you, and why they called you a deserter. Why didn’t you know about it?”

“A simple lapse in communication…apparently. The message reached the rest of the class, whether by folded notes or text message or whatever, but it never made it to me.”

“What? Sounds like…” For the first time, the smile receded from Ogi’s ever-snickering face, to give way to a look of shock and disgust. When people as fair-skinned as her turn pale, they seriously look light blue, like some color sample. “…you were what we might call an outcast?”

“Excuse me? Could you not be so quick to call people wannabe radio shows?”

“Don’t mishear people in ways that expose your dated ideas about tech. Anyway, you didn’t have any friends even before you started saying stupid things like ‘making friends would lower my intensity as a human’!”

“You’re somewhat mistaken.” Though not completely mistaken… “This is a tale about how someone who had no friends came to need no friends.”

“Exactly what an outcast’d say,” commented Ogi, still straight-faced. The pale one showed no interest in sympathizing. If anything, she disdained me the reverence I was owed as her senior gone. “It’s a sad thing to have no friends…”

“I don’t need you to preach at me.”

“Then stop acting so pious… All right, now sit up straight and tell me what happened. This so-called special session of the class council. What was its business for today?”

008

“We’re gathered here today to find the culprit,” Oikura began before I could even take a seat, while the three girls who’d found me had followed Shui’s lead and done so. Completely ignoring that I was just standing there, dumbfounded by the bizarreness of everyone being in class despite school having ended, the class president continued, “Understand that no one will be allowed out of this classroom until we find the culprit, or the culprit comes forward.”

Her tone was harsh—even I’d rarely heard her speak that way, and she considered me an enemy. Her voice told you she’d accept no counterargument. She had no intention of coming to a compromise, and to be frank, this soured the mood inside the classroom. The air was the very picture of hostility—though I guess you can’t illustrate air.

“This is a secret meeting of the class council, no outsiders allowed. Please turn off your cell phones and participate once you have cut off all external communication—Araragi. What are you doing?” said Oikura, finally turning to me. “Close the door. Can you not even close a door?”

I thought she was going to suggest that I sit, but was scolded instead for leaving the door open. I felt like bitching—it wasn’t as if leaving the door open would cause any problems, but maybe she was expressing her determination not to let anyone out.

Then I noticed that all the windows were shut too. This was summer, and locking down a classroom with no air conditioning was a pretty rough thing to do to yourself… Was she trying to create the most inhospitable environment possible? Did she think that she might get lucky and induce the culprit to come forward? And wait, what was this stuff about a culprit? Could she be talking about a mystery novel? No—that wasn’t something you’d gather

everyone to discuss after school, was it?

I took a look at the seat farthest to the back on the gym side—six rows behind Fukado's, it belonged to Hitagi Senjogahara. The fragile-looking, most beautiful girl in class, whom I'd been too frightened to speak to, who seemed somehow noble and extremely sickly, like the heroine in a piece of sanatorium literature, who in fact skipped school all the time—it felt like she'd been absent for more than half of first term. If she was in attendance, it had to be pretty serious.

Someone could suffer heat stroke in a classroom as hot as ours, especially the sickly Senjogahara…

"President Oikura. What do you mean, 'find the culprit'?"

"Shut up. Please, just don't talk. I'm about to explain. I'm following a plan."

Scolded. Sternly, too. Even if you asked her weight, no normal girl would answer in such a tone. I fell silent—what else was I going to do in response to her request—but let me tell you, I didn't recall doing anything to her that merited such hatred. Most of the hostility she directed at me was unearned.

While I fell silent, hoping not to trouble the vice president by daring to ask another question—

"Come on, Oikura. What're you talking about? Why do you get to run this?" a voice seemed to taunt the teacher's desk from right in front of it. It was Okitada Koma. His legs crossed and looking as annoyed as could be, he objected, "You're one of the suspects, too—in fact, aren't you the prime suspect? Everyone's just too scared to say it."

The air grew even more tense. Normally, Koma's voice was too gorgeous to have this effect on anyone, no matter how harsh the words—but even his angel's voice couldn't gloss over or cover up the nerve-wracking content here. I didn't understand what was going on, but I guess he decided to say what everyone was thinking and hit a sore spot? Few others in our class could do this. Certainly not

me, especially when I didn't understand the situation—though it seemed I was the only one in the dark. Had it been explained to everyone while I was on my way? That would suck… Did they lasso me in here and leave me out of the loop at the same time?

"Yes, Koma, I understand that," Oikura agreed. "Thank you for fulfilling your role as a student on day duty and voicing your honest opinion."

Compared to the way she spoke to me, she was polite with him for some reason—in fact, I was the only boy she was rude to as far as I knew. Why the special treatment? I wished I could tell her to stop, but of course I didn't.

"I'm only here in this position provisionally as we begin this session. I'll be handing it over and stepping down once I do—however, as a concerned party, and especially, as you point out, as the most likely suspect, I thought it'd be appropriate for me to give an overview of the situation. I know you're eager to get to cram school, but please, would you zip your mouth up for just a little longer?"

"Kch," Koma muttered in lieu of a response, but went quiet—seemingly annoyed that she'd brought up his cram-school attendance. He was an unusual case, a student who'd applied to Naoetsu High as a backup. Since he was here, he'd failed to get into his first choice—making it a bit hard for him to blend into our class. In fact, his conceited attitude reflected this and also helped him speak out against Oikura without fear. But even he couldn't make the class president back down. There's nothing wrong with a first-year attending cram school (at Naoetsu High, it's deemed praiseworthy), but then again, everyone has his own complexes.

"We got off track thanks to Araragi and Koma—but allow me to explain once more since not everyone seems to understand the situation," Oikura oh-so-subtly shifted the blame before beginning.

Still, I had to give credit where credit was due because she laid it out in simple terms.

"The incident occurred last Wednesday. All of you recall the open

signups for the study sessions to be held in this classroom, correct?"

I didn't. In fact, I knew nothing about it. When were there signups? They were doing something without telling me? A study session? Last Wednesday, meaning right before finals—to prepare for our tests, then.

"Raise your hand if you took part in the study session," requested Oikura, and half the class did. Their hands came down too fast for me to count, but there'd been more than fifteen—a session of a decent size.

Of course, that also meant that about half of the class, myself included, had skipped it—Koma, who'd just spoken up, hadn't raised his hand, for example.

Oikura hadn't either but said, "Yes. And of course, I did too."

I didn't see why this was supposed to be obvious. Because she would have organized the event, as a matter of course? Because raising your hand was an unladylike pose? Whatever the reason, I found it unpleasant. She was implicitly blaming anyone who hadn't participated—you uncooperative, selfish bunch, she seemed to be saying. True, I, at least, was guilty as charged…

"For anyone who was absent, the session was primarily for the purpose of studying mathematics."

Putting aside the fact that not participating in a voluntary session had suddenly turned into an absence—yes, we had two tests the next day, Thursday: math, as well as health and physical education. Health and P.E. first period, then math second period. Thus, the study session had been limited to math—no one would group up to study health and physical education.

"It was a truly wonderful session, where we learned from one another concepts we didn't understand, teaching and furthering each other—I'm very proud to have been able to hold such an event," Oikura stated as if she deserved all the credit. Well, she probably did. Though she wasn't exactly popular, there was a reason an unpopular person had been voted class president in a fair

election.

“However, something occurred that cast a shadow on this auspicious event—which is why I’ve gathered you all here today. I believe it’s our duty as Naoetsu High students to gather at such times, to deal with such situations.”

“Um,” a voice asked to speak as a timid hand rose. It belonged to Hayamachi, a girl who sat next to Koma right in front of the teacher’s desk. “Maybe I’m too stupid to understand, Oikura… But if this is a problem that occurred at the study session, shouldn’t the students at the study session work it out themselves? I didn’t even know there was a study session…”

I had an ally. Not that Hayamachi—Seiko Hayamachi—saw me as anything close to an ally.

“Miss Hayamachi. First of all, please retract your statement, ‘I’m too stupid to understand.’ It’s offensive to the rest of the class,” Oikura said. Offensive because Hayamachi was something of a genius, despite her appearance—not the politest thing to say, but that’s how students at Naoetsu High see any classmate who comes to school with painted nails, more-than-light makeup, and hair dyed brown. Actually, she was more of the hardworking type than a genius…but in terms of how unpleasant Oikura found her, she must’ve been right next to Koma (in addition to their physical positions, in other words).

That said, Oikura didn’t seem to hate her as much as me—the class president didn’t just find me unpleasant, but offensive.

“Well, I only said I was stupid because I am stupid,” replied Hayamachi, not retracting her statement at all as she twirled her hair.

“The problem is what happened after our math tests were returned,” Oikura said, ignoring her unrepentant classmate. “Every one of you conscientious students who participated in the study session got a good score—a wonderful thing. But that’s where a problem arose. No, let’s call it a suspicion, not a problem. A suspicion arose.”

“Suspicion?” I reacted to the word.

Oikura glared at me. Unconscientious students weren’t even allowed to mutter a word in reaction, it seemed. I noticed Tetsujo looking at me with sympathy in her eyes. Komichi Tetsujo. Member of the softball team. If Oikura was the leader of our class, she was the mediator. Given her personality, she was concerned about the friction between me and Oikura, but at the moment, meeker than usual, she wasn’t speaking up. Was a sympathetic look the most she could do for me here? Sorry, but it meant nothing. Though maybe it beat jumping in and starting a heated argument with the class president—not that there could ever be one between the sharp-tongued Oikura and the above-the-fray Tetsujo.

“To put it plainly, this suspicion is a suspicion of cheating. Compared to those who were absent from the study session, the test scores of the students who did participate were too high,” Oikura said. “There is a gap of about twenty points on average between students who participated and those who were absent. A ten-or-so point difference could be credited to a study session, but a twenty-point difference is too significant to ignore. Some form of foul play must have occurred.”

“…”

Foul play—cheating.

So “finding the culprit” was about figuring out who cheated—wait, but in this case…

“Hold on, izzat what’cha call cheating? I thought cheating was like, taking a peek at someone’s answers during a test,” piped up Mebe, who sat behind Tetsujo—Miawa Mebe. A student from the west side of Japan nicknamed Whip. Nothing in her name referred to whip(ped cream), but she’d gotten a dessert-related nickname thanks to her friendship with Tone. Her approachable personality meant a reasonably friendly relationship with even Oikura (a miracle in my eyes—I wanted to beg her to teach me but had never spoken to the girl, who was approachable) and being able to make her point frankly.

“You’re right.”

Sure enough, Oikura stayed calm. Wait, had Mebe attended the study session? I hadn’t paid too much attention when everyone raised their hands, so I couldn’t be sure…

“My suspicion is that the foul play took the following form. A certain someone,” Oikura worded it in a way that exuded intense animosity□on par with what she felt for me, “acquired the test questions from the teachers’ room, then quietly introduced their contents into the study session. As a result, all of the students who participated got higher scores.”

“Huh? But why’d you wanna do that?” Mebe tilted her head. “Test questions? If you got ’em unfairly, why not keep ’em to yerself? Teaching everyone in the session would be like□”

“I can think of a number of reasons why someone would do that and cannot pick just one. Camouflage, perhaps, or it might’ve been for the thrill of it,” answered Oikura, only giving two possible reasons. I guess listing every reason she could think of was too laborious, and her plan was to consider motive later. “In any case, it’d be unforgivable if someone did indeed sully our sacred study session along with our inviolable final exam□and I don’t want any of you who were absent to assume this has nothing to do with you, either. This is a problem for all of Year 1 Class 3. To repeat myself…”

She banged on the table. For some reason, Sodachi Oikura glared at me as she continued□like it was a declaration of war.

“Understand that no one will be allowed out of this classroom until we find the culprit, or the culprit comes forward.”

009

“Haha. We started off looking for a hidden room from a blueprint, got ourselves into a locked room, and now we’re trying to identify the perp? It’s really getting to seem like we’re in a mystery novel. What an interesting story. Both exciting and eccentric.”

“There’s nothing interesting about it… I’m sure you can guess how things turned out when a bunch of amateurs got together to finger a culprit.” I shook my head at Ogi’s optimism. I’d barely started telling the story, and I already felt pretty depressed—why I was sharing all this with a girl I’d met for the first time?

I hadn’t even told Shinobu.

“Heh. Still, she sounds quite stern, this old Ikura—sorry, Oikura.”

“Old Ikura? Ha, funny mistake to make… Should’ve said that one to her face.”

Not that I had anything close to the courage to do so—back then, I’d been afraid of her for real. There’s something extra frightening about people who’re incomprehensibly hostile to you.

“Of course, I’d yet to learn that her brand of sternness was cute compared to Senjogahara—who had malice in her heart, not hostility.”

“Ah. I didn’t want to interrupt you, but you just reminded me. You referred to a Senjogahara in your story, but am I right to assume that’s the same Senjogahara who’s now your girlfriend? The witch with a poison tongue, the tsundere queen Senjogahara?”

“What kinds of stories have you heard about her? But yeah, you’re right.”

She’d had a change of heart and was reformed—but the fact that the

girl then known as a flower in a bell jar (really a rose that was all thorns), the heroine in a piece of sanatorium literature (really the monster in a horror novel), and a cloistered princess (really an animal that needed to be caged) is my girlfriend two years later just goes to show that relationships work in the strangest ways.

That said…no other classmate from back then is still on good terms with me.

“I didn’t know her true identity at the time, so let’s just say she used to be the sickly, cloistered princess.”

“Well, then sure, let’s both say it,” Ogi egged me on happily—I guess she was a good listener, or at least she genuinely seemed to be relishing my story. There was nothing pleasant about telling it, but I couldn’t stop while she acted this way. It’s weird, but it felt like my mouth had a mind of its own—and spoke independent of me.

“Umm. Where was I again?”

“The part where Oikura declared no one would be leaving the classroom until the culprit was exposed. Hm? Was it to you that she ceded the position of chair? You said you presided over a class council meeting.”

“Oh, right—that’s where I took over.”

“I see. So basically she was the kari-oya, and you became the actual dealer once she rolled the dice.”

“A mahjong metaphor only makes things harder to understand…” Ogi apparently had some very mature hobbies. Maybe she knew how to play hanafuda, too?

“Fine, no one literally rolled dice. She decided of her own will to name you chair, didn’t she? And that’s why she left you standing instead of letting you sit.”

“Yup—that’s it.” Even if I didn’t see the need to keep me standing the whole time.

“I don’t get it in that case. Why pick you? Didn’t anyone protest?”

“It’s not like everyone was in favor of it, of course—like this one boy, Shinaniwa. Ayazute Shinaniwa, who was like elitism personified… He had a habit of looking down on people, and guys like me were as far down as he could look. He was pretty adamantly against it.”

“All kinds of people hate you, huh? An elitist… It does seem like there are a lot of those in this school. Maybe that’s where Oikura’s harshness was coming from? But don’t worry, Araragi-senpai, being hated is a virtue.”

“Put a little more thought into it when you praise people… I almost agreed with you for a second, but no, of course being hated isn’t a virtue. And it wasn’t like Shinaniwa hated me or anything, he just looked down on me.”

“Is there really a difference? Anyway, did this Shinaniwa take part in the study session, too?”

“No—he was the type to study alone. He wasn’t as exclusionary as Koma, though. The kid looked down on people he thought were beneath him and even cut them off at times, but he was really friendly with anyone he saw to be on his level or above.”

“Sounds like he’s the worst.”

“He wasn’t a bad guy.”

Wasn’t a bad guy—another line I could utter only because we weren’t close. What did I know about Ayazute Shinaniwa or Sodachi Oikura? Familiarity with a guy’s profile doesn’t make you his friend.

“But everyone in class, including this current third-year, Shinaniwa, accepted you as chair in the end,” Ogi said. “Why was that?”

“Well, someone from the study session running the meeting would be bad, right? Just like how Koma pointed out that Oikura was the most likely suspect. About half of the class lost any right to be chair—but that didn’t mean anyone from the remaining half would do. We were there because of a math test, after all. We’d be

examining the questions asked on it, so you couldn't leave it to someone with only so-so math grades."

"Huh, well, I suppose." Since we weren't going through and verifying the answers, being poor at math wouldn't have been an issue□Ogi seemed to want to say, but she simply nodded for the time being. "Still, the average score of the students who were absent□or who didn't participate in the study session was twenty points lower than the average of the students who did. Did anyone in the non-participating group score high enough to rival the study-session students?"

"Sure□I mean, I want to say Hayamachi got a 92. The participants weren't the only people who did well on the final, which did make things a little complicated. Only one student, though, got a higher score than everyone from the study session. Yours truly."

"What…"

"Which is why□I was chosen to chair the meeting."

010

100 points.

100 points out of 100—was my score on the math final. Sodachi Oikura had the next highest, a 99 (the highest score out of anyone from the study session).

I was all but unable to keep up with Naoetsu High's curriculum, math being the one exception—it sounds like I'm bragging to say it was my best subject, but math was easier for me because you didn't have to think. Still, a perfect score was a little too good—which is why I felt more anxiety than joy when I got my test back. Wouldn't there be some sort of blowback, I wondered, and my prediction had been spot-on.

I couldn't believe it—had I picked that short of a straw? I stood at the teacher's desk, but actually wanted to hide underneath it. So that was how my teachers (or Oikura) saw the classroom—I couldn't bear all the eyes on me. I was grateful for students like Kijikiri and Senjogahara who were looking away, uninterested.

"All right, Araragi. Think you could start speeding us along? Prove our innocence for us," urged Oikura, her words full of hostility and sarcasm—her seat may have been in the back, but the five chairs' worth of distance between us did nothing to damper the pressure coming from her.

I assume you've figured this out already, but her pathological hatred for me stemmed from my being good at math. She was convinced it was thanks to me and my higher math scores that no one called her Euler. Her resentment went beyond unjustified, it was indiscriminate. Naturally, I couldn't accept this and even tried (recklessly) arguing with her—come on, your scores are so much higher than mine in every subject that we're not even in competition—but that was in fact the very reason for her fury,

according to her. She said it was like monkeys typing out Shakespeare in front of someone who wanted to become a novelist. What an awful thing to say…

I wasn't going to go out of my way to do poorly in math, my island of hope in the sea of Naoetsu High's curriculum… I wished she'd work to surpass me of her own accord, but that chance vanished once I got a perfect score.

"Of course, since you were the only one to get a perfect score, Araragi, we can't count out the possibility that you stole the answers," Oikura said combatively. What? Hadn't she appointed me? Was it my duty as chair to counter this spiteful jab of an opinion?

"That seems like kind of a stretch," a voice said in my place. Well, maybe not in my place, but the words were spoken to Oikura by a student sitting directly in front of her, Keiri Ashine—Year 1 Class 3's student no. 1. He was student no. 1, and I was no. 2—our consecutive roll-call numbers meant we were somewhat friendly. Okay, maybe not friendly, but we'd at least spoken before, and that trivial little link might have moved him to defend me. Like Mebe, he was one of the few students on good terms with Oikura—but in his case, he had some degree of influence over nearly every girl in class, not just her. His nickname was straight-up Handsome, after all. He wasn't the kind of guy you could describe in superficial, flashy terms like "hunky"—plus, he was good-natured if he had no reservations about interacting with someone as bothersome as me. Handsome and a good guy. No faults to find with him, and he continued his faultless argument.

"Since Araragi didn't even know that the study session existed, he wasn't in touch with anyone in it. How could he have had an impact on their average score? And didn't you pick him as chair partly because he has no conflicts of interest with anyone in class?"

"W-Well, true…"

Oikura faltered in a rare display for her—so even our class appraiser had a weakness for handsome boys. How disappointing, but even more disappointing was his remark that I had no conflicts of

interest with anyone in class. He'd stood up for me just to cut me down where I stood.

It was true, though… At any kind of class council event, whether it involved being in groups of two or three or four, I, Koyomi Araragi, was always the one student left over at the end—and perhaps my lack of connections actually qualified me for the independent position of chair.

As depressing a job as it was…

"Okay, then," I said, "let's start by having everyone in the study session raise their hands, please."

I considered wording it as more of an arrogant command but didn't want to make any unnecessary waves. I'd act humble and proceed in a businesslike manner. To be honest, I didn't see how any amount of talk could reveal the culprit…but either way, I had to take care of this. The students whose arms had shot up for Oikura raised them slowly this time as if they were eyeing one another.

"I want you to keep your hands raised. I'm going to write your names on the blackboard."

"Oh, I can do that," Gekizaka volunteered, standing up. She was assuming the position of court clerk, an assertive move that was very much like her. Well, she had her hand raised until just a moment ago, which made her one of the suspects… But no, what was the harm in letting her be a simple clerk, even if she'd been in the study session? Gekizaka threaded her way through the seats to the front before I could accept her offer, and started by writing her own name on the blackboard. Some students looked at her as they would a traitor—they had their hands raised, naturally.

Or maybe they just found her pushiness suspicious—and Nageki Gekizaka's candid personality always made the girl an easy target for doubt. She never seemed to pay enough attention to the wall or fence between boys and girls and casually touched students of the opposite sex, which often resulted in trouble… You know, the kind of girl who made guys wonder, Is she actually into me? On that occasion too, I couldn't deny harboring some level of groundless

suspicion simply because she'd volunteered. Maybe boys are just stupid, but in any case, her name wasn't solely responsible for her nickname Nagekiss. She returned to her seat two rows in front of Senjogahara after writing the names of every student with a raised hand, in addition to her own, on the blackboard.

Now I knew the names of the nineteen students who'd participated in the study session. Gekizaka had written only their last names, in whatever haphazard order she noticed them, but let me give their full names here, ordered by the Japanese syllabary:

1: Keiri Ashine 2: Michisada Igami 3: Sodachi Oikura 4: Enji Kikigoe 5: Hoka Kijikiri 6: Aizu Kube 7: Nageki Gekizaka 8: Sosho Kodo 9: Tsuma Shui 10: Judo Shuzawa 11: Kokushi Su'uchi 12: Ki'ichigo Daino 13: Choka Nagagutsu 14: Roka Haga 15: Sekiro Higuma 16: Joro Hishigata 17: Shijima Fudo 18: Kabe Madomura 19: Shokei Yoki

011

“Huh! So you narrowed it down to nineteen suspects this is getting exciting. Or maybe that’s inappropriate. Am I in trouble? Heheh,” Ogi said, showing self-restraint but laughing openly. It made me want to throw some water on her enjoyment.

“It’s not that simple. Yes, everyone in the study session was suspicious, but that didn’t clear everyone who hadn’t participated of all doubt,” I noted. I wasn’t just throwing some water, I was trying to drown her enjoyment. “To give an extreme example, someone might have stolen the answers and put them in the head of someone in the study session, indirectly influencing how they answered the test questions.”

“Indirectly, you say. Hmm, possible, I guess,” Ogi said, amused.

Any wet blanket I could throw was going to land on red-hot rocks, and the only thing that was flailing its arms was my dignity. “If the plan was to have fun by raising the class’s average score, that’d be the best way…”

“Would that really be so fun?”

“Who knows, I wasn’t the one but think about it. It’d be fun if you didn’t care about the consequences. It’d make you feel like a god.”

“Playing god… I don’t think I approve.”

Hm? It felt odd that her reaction had gotten a little more negative. Maybe as Oshino’s niece, she was sensitive to talk of the divine? I told myself this before putting us back on track.

“In any case, you could supply the info to the study session without being a part of it.”

“If that’s what happened the culprit would be a student who didn’t

participate in the study session who got a good score on the test," conjectured Ogi. "In other words, someone who got a grade on the same level as the students in the study session despite not being a part of it—other than you, of course."

"Hah. Sure, sure, I had no conflicts of interest with anyone in class…" Oikura might have glared at me, but there was only conflict between us, not any kind of interest.

"Oh, don't pout like that. Here, I'll be kind to you."

With that, Ogi put both of her arms around my neck. In an instant, they were wrapped around my throat—like she was a scarf or something.

"I think you're a little close," I finally cautioned my underclassman, as a guy with a girlfriend.

"Excuse me. This level of distance is normal where I grew up. Just think of it as the kind of friendly physical contact that Gekizaka gave everyone," Ogi retorted, unembarrassed.

Gekizaka was never that handsy with anyone, I'm pretty sure…

"Anyway, please continue—which one of the nineteen was the culprit?"

"Didn't I just say it wasn't necessarily one of them? And even if it was a student who skipped the session, he or she might not have done well on the test. You might get a bad score on purpose to avoid suspicion, in fact. So everyone's back to being a suspect."

"Intentionally? Who'd go that far on an all-important test?"

"You might, or you might not—I'm trying to convey that we didn't know anything. I'm going to go ahead and spoil it here, Ogi. We failed to identify the culprit at that meeting."

"What?"

"In that sense, there's no neat conclusion to this story, just confusion. The class council's investigation turned into a class-wide

castigation. Things got as ugly as they could, and it seemed pointless to everyone by the end, whether you were Oikura or Shui or Tetsujo. Basically, it fell apart, and we weren't able to learn anything at all. And then□"

"Oh, okay!"

Ogi smacked both of my shoulders, going beyond physical contact to plain assault. The longer I talked about this, the more depressed I felt□jumping to the end was my idea of cutting the whole thing short, but it had given her an idea.

"Now I know how we can escape from here. We just have to solve the unsolved case from two years ago and then we can leave."

"What…do you mean?"

"Oikura declared that no one would be allowed out of this classroom until the culprit was revealed. Which means identifying the perpetrator of that case□is how we escape this room. Am I right?"

"…"

Was she right? Well, if the classroom was a faithful recreation of what took place that day after school in Year 1 Class 3, then…she was.

We'd learned nothing through the fierce debate (a nice way to put it, "pandemonium" would be more accurate) that lasted until it was time to leave the premises. That's how the class council ended□yet the clock in the room was stopped right before closing time.

The windows were locked, the doors were shut tight□we couldn't get out.

"The regret left behind in Year 1 Class 3's hearts that day must have taken form as this structural gap," Ogi insisted. "Call it the ghost of the class council meeting."

"A ghost, of a meeting? Are you claiming we've been trapped by something that nonsensical? And why me…"

“Hard to say. Maybe because you’re the one it still bothers most□you never know, your life did change that day.”

“It changed?”

“Since that day, you’ve avoided thinking about what happened. You’ve been dodging it□you’ve never forgotten about it but never thought about it either. But it’s come at last□the day when you have to face your past. Time to unravel this mystery.”

I didn’t know how Ogi could be so sure… There could be plenty of other reasons for this aberration.

She grinned□invitingly.

“I’d be happy to help you reason through it, if I can manage to be of any use. Go down the list, and tell me what happened. Let’s start with those nineteen suspects’ profiles. At the end of the day, they’re the most suspicious, right?”

“Okay…I’ll go down the list. I’m skipping the ones I already talked about, though□”

012

1: Keiri Ashine—already introduced.

2: Michisada Igami—apparently called Doctor because of the character for “medicine” in his name, it wasn’t as if his parents were doctors. Still, they seemed to be reasonably wealthy, and he was well known for his generous nature. He never went as far as to modify his school uniform, but I heard rumors that his street clothes were pretty flashy. They said he’d brought snacks for everyone to the study session. However, he strongly insisted that he couldn’t be the culprit—the reason being that he’d only gotten a 68.

“Who would raise everyone’s scores, come to the study session, and still get a 68 on his own test?”

While his argument made sense, it didn’t clear him of all suspicion for reasons stated earlier. There was a high material chance that you committed the crime if you participated in the study session. By the way, he was the only participant who scored in the 60s. There weren’t even students who scored in the 70s; everyone else received an 80 or above. A single student getting an unusually bad score might be termed suspicious.

3: Sodachi Oikura—already introduced.

4: Enji Kikigoe—you could say he was more suspect than Ashine, specifically because he was known to be a prankster. Once, he planted a paper-cutter blade inside a blackboard eraser so it’d screech the next time someone went to erase some chalk—fortunately, this was discovered in time. Otherwise, we’d have been lucky if only a window or two shattered. “I don’t do any pranks that inconvenience anyone,” the kid said, convincing nobody.

What’s funny was that his first name, which included the character

for “smoke,” earned him the nickname Spy, making him seem that much more suspicious—though I’m sure he only found it galling, not funny, that his parents’ sensibility was cause for suspicion.

5: Hoka Kijikiri—already introduced. As a special note, it’d be closer to the truth to say that she’d absentmindedly been sitting in the classroom when the study session took place around her. She did get a good score, however, and since she was at the scene, she couldn’t have heard nothing…

6: Aizu Kube—known as the library assistant, even though Naoetsu High had no such position. It was the school’s ethos not to let us do anything but pursue our studies—she only got the title because she loved to read. She read on the way to school, of course, and during breaks, and sometimes even during class—a true warrior that read Rilla of Ingleside as a high school freshman. There was one other student in our class addicted to the printed word, Hitagi Senjogahara, but while she was an indiscriminate reader, Kube had a special love for classic foreign novels. Hadn’t gone so far as to read during the study session, apparently.

7: Nageki Gekizaka—already introduced.

8: Sosho Kodo—a tall student on the girls’ volleyball team. For some strange reason, she had a tan despite playing an indoor sport. I suppose the running and muscle-building parts happened outdoors. In any case, the rare example of a student who devoted herself to extracurriculars in a class that mostly went straight home after school. She had a contradictory personality, coarse yet high-strung—might be overstating the case in a mere introduction, but to put it simply, she hated it when anyone used her things but was always using other people’s things. She’d borrow pens, notebooks, and textbooks without asking, even destroying, ripping, and losing them, but never let anyone borrow anything of hers. She got livid, too, if you went ahead without asking first… According to Fuyunami, an old friend of hers, Kodo was “mentally immature.” Clubs and teams went on hiatus before testing periods, so she had no problem taking part in the study session.

9: Tsuma Shui—already introduced. While Oikura ran the study session, naturally the vice president supported her. “If Oikura is the

most likely suspect, I'm just as likely of a suspect," he said calmly—no doubt an attempt to shoulder some of the suspicion placed on Oikura, to which she replied, "It doesn't make sense for there to be two most likely suspects. I'm the most likely." She had to be number one at everything, even when it came to suspicion.

10: Judo Shuzawa—even if he hadn't raised his hand, everyone would have assumed he'd taken part in the study session. Shuzawa didn't seem to realize it himself, but he was the kind of boy who loved these kinds of events. I guess he liked study sessions, or maybe just teaching people things? He always wanted to teach. He "taught" me a lot of things for our midterms, but I was more bothered by his pushiness than grateful for his help. I say that because he didn't care one bit whether I understood him—still, his eager-to-teach personality matched the assumed profile of our culprit. This probably has nothing to do with any of the above, but he also wore a watch on each wrist. "It keeps me from being unbalanced"—mental balance might be what he really lacked.

11: Kokushi Su'uchi—an understated student. By which I mean he had no notable qualities and tried to hide among the rest of us. As a fellow student on the less popular side, I'd interacted with him before, but without getting any kind of read on him. It was unclear what Su'uchi liked and what he disliked. Of course, he wasn't going to open up to someone like me. He didn't seem like the type to participate in a study session, but if he had without incident, I guess he wasn't particularly antisocial. In other words, I was the only one of us who thought we were alike.

12: Ki'ichigo Daino—while I thought the girl's first name, "raspberry," was the more distinctive of the two, for whatever reason both the boys and the girls in class took the beginning of her last name and called her Daa. She was eloquent, a born talker, and built a logical case for just how not suspicious she was—convincing me that whoever the culprit was, it couldn't have been her. When I thought about it afterwards, she wasn't convincing at all. She seemed to be in a real rush to leave, maybe she had somewhere to be—we all wanted to go home, though. Even I wanted to go home already.

13: Choka Nagagutsu—simply put, the class clown. He was the one

who set the mood in Year 1 Class 3. But a lot of the girls hated him. Like, actually hated him. He had a tendency to go overboard and make them cry—okay, not often enough to call it a tendency, but in high school you don't forget when someone makes a girl cry. The impression was burned into our minds. Maybe the problem was that the kid didn't seem sorry at all. Oikura had half given up on him—why wasn't she bothering to give up on me too? He showed up for the study session but didn't take it very seriously, treating the whole thing as a joke, depending on who you asked. Did his presence actually drag down their average?

14: Roka Haga—an athletic girl on the track team, but also a gamer. A problem child who brought portable gaming systems to school and had them confiscated. She even played during class with the sound off—Kube read novels during class, but this was verboten on a whole other level. Yet she took part in the study session because her midterm results had been awful thanks to her track and videogame commitments. She needed to recover from that—and her efforts paid off, earning her a 96. Thus, like Oikura, she was disappointed that her achievement had been called into question. It made me a little curious to know how she did in her other classes.

15: Sekiro Higuma—a student council president during middle school, he ran against Oikura in our election at the beginning of the term. Losing only by a slight margin, he was nominated for vice president, but apparently not interested, he withdrew himself (it didn't sound like he'd become class president during middle school out of personal ambition, either—more like, the teacher forced him to). This stance of his struck people as modest and virtuous and made him popular with the girls—he was second only to the "handsome" Ashikura. Initially known as Ice thanks to the character "hi" in his surname. This was too similar to Tone's nickname of Icing, and he started getting called Kilo for the "kiro" in his given name.

16: Joro Hishigata—a member of the softball team and our dependable big sis type. Unmistakably one of the core pieces of our class, alongside Oikura's charisma-through-fear and Tetsujo's oddly unreliable mediation. As a girl she did make a habit of siding with the girls—but boys respected her too, cowed by how she never took

so much as a half step back in the face of anyone, even a boy. She certainly could've worked on her temper, though.

17: Shijima Fudo—a girl on the swimming team. She lied and said her father was a professional baseball player, a mysterious fabrication she couldn't easily take back. She had brown hair, but unlike Hayamachi claimed it was due to all the chlorine in the pool—this too may have been a lie. She was at the study session, which we knew for sure thanks to witnesses.

18: Kabe Madomura—another one of the few students involved in extracurriculars. The light music club, too. To think that Naoetsu High had any activity that fun-focused. His often-standing hair wasn't an expression of his rock-and-roll spirit though, just bedhead. Kind of a letdown. Good English thanks to all the Western music he grew up on, while math, he admitted, wasn't his forte, hence his presence at the study session—did he really need to lead in with that stuff about being good at English?

19: Shokei Yoki—an old-fashioned kid. An anachronism, even. He was given to asking what it means to be a man, annoying us boys, let alone the girls, with his sweaty talk. He just kept going on about masculinity, oblivious to our reaction… If you put up with it, though, he sometimes said surprisingly substantial stuff—what it means to be a man was actually about being a gentleman, not that it made him any less of an anachronism. Still, he had a bad habit of being blustery and was the first one to suggest that Kikigoe, the prankster Spy, was suspicious.

In total—nineteen individuals.

These nineteen had taken part in the study session held the day before the final. The culprit may have been among them, or perhaps not.

013

“So most of Year 1 Class 3 weren’t in any extracurriculars… Do you mind me asking about that, Araragi-senpai? How many others were in clubs or on teams?”

“Huh? Why do you wanna know?”

“When you’re laying the truth bare, you never know what might turn out to be a hint. After saying there weren’t many club members, you described three in a row who were toward the end. It made me wonder. I’d like to look into whatever sets I can.”

Laying the truth bare sounded a little extreme, but I answered her anyway. The study-session people who were in clubs were Kodo, on the volleyball team; Haga, on the track team; Hishigata, on the softball team; Fudo, on the swimming team; and Madomura, in the light music club. Those five—and Ogi was right, there did happen to be three in a row based on how I organized the list, but five out of nineteen still seemed on the low side.

“Yes. Which is why I want to know about the non-participants who were in clubs and on teams—didn’t you say at the beginning that Suisen Toishima was in the flower arrangement club? And that Tetsujo, the class mediator who led you guys alongside Sodachi Oikura, was a member of the softball team?”

“Oh…yeah, with Hishigata.”

“I see. The softball team—who else in your class was on it?”

“No one. Whatever you’re hoping to get from this…like every other extracurricular at our school, the softball team was plagued every year by a lack of members. I want to say that Tetsujo invited Hishigata to join? As far as other kids who skipped the session, Shinaniwa was on the track team, like Haga. And Fuyunami played

volleyball.”

“Fuyunami. You mentioned him once before—right, childhood friends with Kodo. Huh. Childhood friends playing the same sport. Kind of romantic.”

“I’m pretty sure the boys’ team and the girls’ team are basically different clubs…”

Well, it was just a prediction, or preconception—as if I, who’d been going straight home ever since middle school, knew anything about how clubs operated.

“Fuyunami—Saka’atsu Fuyunami joined the volleyball team to get taller. Seriously, boys like him exist. They buy the urban legend that if you compete in sports where height matters, like volleyball or basketball, your body meets that demand and grows… I think it’s BS, though.”

“A-ha. Which is why you don’t bother with any extracurriculars.”

“Let’s not go into that. But yeah, Fuyunami is about my height…I don’t know if he thought we were buddies or what, but he approached me at the start of the school year—that’s when he told me Kodo was mentally immature. Maybe hanging around with other short boys gave him no comfort because he distanced himself from me pretty quickly. After that, he made friends with guys with more solid builds, like Higuma.”

“Ah. How do I put it… Seems like his childhood friend wasn’t the only mentally immature one—not terribly romantic.”

“Then there’s Mizaki, a member of the art club… Oh, right. I almost forgot, Yuba was on the baseball team.”

“Mizaki. Yuba. Both names I’m hearing for the first time.”

“Yeah—Mizaki’s full name is Meibi Mizaki. Everyone called him P’raps because of his first name.”

“P’raps… Year 1 Class 3 had a unique sensibility when it came to nicknames, I see. By the way, what was yours?”

“I didn’t have one.”

“Sorry that I asked,” Ogi muttered apologetically—I much preferred her smirking and calling me a fool to the look now on her face.

“Mizaki was a real artist and free spirit. He didn’t quite fit in. Maybe he, rather than Su’uchi, was the student whose position resembled mine. He didn’t take part in the study session, either.”

“But did have a nickname.”

“I guess. The girls would ask him to draw them during break, so they didn’t hate him, at least…”

Which reminded me—Oikura had modeled for him too. I realized, belatedly, that his artistic temperament was actually his way of socializing.

“And Yuba? You seem to have nearly forgotten some of these people—were they that non-notable?”

“Oh, the opposite. Yuba was extra-notable—it’s just that he was only on the baseball team on paper. A total ghost member, which is why his name slipped my mind—Shokunori Yuba.”

“A ghost member. He must have something to do with this ghostly classroom.”

“Um, I don’t think so?”

While we ought to be thinking of every possibility, tying an ever-absent sports team member to a supernatural phenomenon was a bit much.

“But he was very notable?”

“Have Kanbaru or Oshino or anyone told you that I tend to skip school a lot?”

“Oh, well, to an extent,” Ogi decided to play dumb for whatever reason. So she wasn’t always trying to be a know-it-all.

“Yuba was already skipping school more than me during the first term of our freshman year. He’d show up late, leave early, and not even attend classes he didn’t like. Kijikiri was absent a lot too, but it was a little different with her… Yeah, the only one who came to school less than Yuba was Senjogahara, who was in and out of the hospital.”

“So a true delinquent, unlike your delinquency-lite?”

“I wouldn’t say that… But there was something menacing about him. It made you think twice about bringing up his conduct with him… He had piercing eyes and a shaved head□”

Well, maybe his head was shaved because he was on the baseball team□ghost member or not.

“How scary. I’d better avoid him during my time here.”

“No need to worry. He already quit.”

“Oh my. Is that so?”

“Right after that class council meeting□maybe he lost hope, like me. Friends, classmates, unity□maybe he got bored of it all.”

What was he up to these days?

I wouldn’t have known how to ask him back then, but I felt like I did now.

“By the way, Yuba scored a zero on that final.”

“A zero? No, you don’t actually mean zero□it’s actually a feat to get a zero.”

“He turned in a blank test□I think he was trying to make a point. Maybe his act of rebellion makes him suspicious. Leaking the answers then getting a zero yourself would be one way to turn the entire idea of testing into a joke.”

“I doubt it□still, people believe in all sorts of things. Did someone who look so threatening have a route for leaking the answers,

though?"

"Yeah. We were afraid of him, but somehow, he wasn't isolated—by the way, everyone called him Chin Prop. Because even when he did show up to class, he'd take this defiant pose, propping up his chin—same goes for during the class council meeting."

"So even he had a nickname, but not you. A powerful anecdote."

"…That's everyone in a club or team. All the others went straight home. Not that many, right? Oh, I should mention—a girl named Waritori. She wasn't in any extracurricular but went to a serious-sounding dojo after school. Practical kendo, or something…"

Not that I knew what practical meant in that context, but it must've been like the karate school that my little sister Karen attends.

"Shitsue Waritori—at first I thought she was in the kendo club because she sometimes wore her gi to class. She was one of the harder girls to approach. Not like she swung a bamboo sword around, but she'd start beating on you with a broom if there was a problem. You could say she was violent, or maybe quick to put her hands on you—or her rod. Only Hishigata got into fights quicker than her."

"Sounds like she lacked mental discipline. An awful lot of mentally immature students in that class."

"Maybe, being practical, her dojo wasn't into the whole discipline thing? Anyway, this was two years ago—during our first year of high school. Of course we were all immature—boys, girls, and not just Kodo, Fuyunami, or Waritori."

Oikura, and me too.

Immature, inexperienced—not fully formed.

If only we'd been aware of that back then—things'd be different two years later.

"Then again," Ogi reminded me, "thanks to that experience you met Miss Shinobu and Miss Hanekawa and are dating Miss Senjogahara.

The night is always darkest just before dawn."

"Well, I guess…" She'd wrapped my life up in a neat little package.

"In any case, that was very helpful. Thank you so much. Sorry for interrupting you, but I've closed in on the truth about most everything here. Please, continue. After you had the names of the nineteen most likely suspects written out on the blackboard, what happened?" prodded Ogi, so naturally that I didn't notice just how casually she'd said closed in on the truth.

"As soon as we wrote down the nineteen names, Arikure began to complain about something we've brought up. The culprit wasn't necessarily one of the nineteen…"

014

“Hold on. It seems like you’ve already made up your minds that it’s one of these students□but that’s not necessarily true, is it? Even if Hayamachi wants to go home because she thinks her absence at the meeting proves her innocence.”

I didn’t think Hayamachi had gone that far, but she didn’t bother to defend herself, probably not interested in dealing with Arikure. Still, that’d cast suspicion on everyone who skipped the study session too, including Arikure. Did she love complaining so much that the cost didn’t matter?

That wasn’t the case, of course… “Anyone who got a high score is suspect, even if they didn’t attend the study session,” she argued□having gotten a 65, this put her in the clear (but not Hayamachi, with her 92). On the other hand, since the culprit might’ve done badly on purpose to avoid detection (in the extreme case, submitting a blank sheet and scoring a zero as Yuba did), it was a weak argument.

“Okay, then let’s add to the list students who didn’t participate but got…say a 90 or above,” I proposed grudgingly□a compromise if there ever was one. If anyone insisted that students with low scores were also suspicious, everyone in class would be on the blackboard□what was this, roll call?

The non-participants with scores of 90 or above were as follows, in the same order as before□since there were so few, I wrote them myself rather than bother Gekizaka.

1: Koyomi Araragi (100) 2: Okitada Koma (97) 3: Hitagi Senjogahara (98) 4: Seiko Hayamachi (92) 5: Miawa Mebe (95)

…The list made me realize it included a lot of suspicious characters, like me. Mebe, however, was the most conspicuous. She wasn’t seen

as someone who got good grades. Meanwhile, my math skills were well known (and even called puzzling), Koma went to cram school, while Senjogahara and Hayamachi were famous for their excellent grades. There stood Mebe in contrast—not that her academics were always sitting below average. Couldn't she have her good days?

Test results were posted for all to see, so everyone knew everyone else's scores. But when we applied specific conditions to narrow it down to just this group, her score did seem somehow unnatural—and Arikure, who'd been the catalyst for this, looked perplexed too. She must not have intended to attack anyone in particular.

As for Mebe, she was at a loss. "Huh? Hold on, naw…"

This seemed like a normal reaction to being questioned, if not suspected, by her classmates. It also looked like she was acting guilty, but that was probably biased.

"No way, I dunno. I've got nothing to do with it."

"Could you not finger a culprit based on nothing, Araragi?" said Oikura, like it was my fault—she was shielding one of her few friends. No one objected because she was, in fact, right: Mebe's 95 didn't prove she'd done anything wrong.

"Wait, hold on," another student raised her hand. It belonged to Ukitobi, who sat behind Hayamachi. "Um…so I probably got the lowest score out of all the girls? Which is why this might sound like an excuse? But I think this math test was pretty hard—could you solve the questions if you knew the answers?"

"…?"

It took me a moment to take her meaning. Maybe she didn't really get what she was saying, either.

Arikure spoke again. "What are you talking about? Of course you could if you knew the answers. You'd just have to memorize them…"

But it seemed she, too, understood Ukitobi's inarticulate remark.

Right, putting aside motive, a method as blatant as getting everyone to memorize the answers didn't work if the culprit was introducing the test's contents to a whole study session. Maybe if it was just two or three people, but with a group of nineteen, someone was bound to report it—in common parlance, you'd have a snitch. This crime couldn't have that many partners; the contents needed to be imprinted unconsciously in the minds of the majority of the participants.

Still, their average was just too high… I mean, everyone other than Igami getting an 80 or higher? Sharing the info in a subtle manner wouldn't lead to such a result.

"But if we started asking that, there'd be no end to it," Ukitobi admitted, as if to dispel the silence her comment had brought on—Kyusu Ukitobi. I want to say she got a 57—the lowest score out of all the girls, or rather, aside from Yuba. Yet she'd made the lone brilliant point in our meeting. I didn't have any sort of impression of her until then—must've been one of those kids who was smart, just bad at studying. The type shows up all the time in manga, but I'd never met one in real life. I couldn't help but stare.

"S-Sorry, Araragi. That wasn't my intention," she apologized. I was admiring, not accusing, her—a sad misunderstanding, but not one I could clear up.

"Actually, why are we assuming there was foul play in the first place?"

This was Daino. It was as if she'd been waiting for everyone to settle down so she could launch into one of her eloquent speeches.

"As someone who worked very hard for this test, I'm finding this very unpleasant, to be frank. The average score of students who participated in a study session exceeding the rest by twenty points is eminently possible. Not to mention, the latter's average was dragged down by a certain somebody." She was referring of course to Yuba—the air grew even chillier when she jerked his chain, but the class menace didn't seem to mind at all. His chin propped in his hand like always, he only glanced at Daino.

“You had Araragi to make up for all the points Yuba lost,” Oikura said, her voice dripping with sarcasm—why, I wanted to ask. Me, just an innocent bystander! “Still, Miss Daino, you are right. It certainly is unpleasant to be suspected of something you have absolutely no recollection of. That’s why we need to clear ourselves of such suspicion.”

It was a non-answer—she’d agreed without amending her own view. When you did that, the individual in the weaker position could only back down, and indeed Daino shut up. Reluctantly.

…I’d later come to learn that the meeting hadn’t been summoned at the school’s behest. It was Oikura’s idea from start to finish. She saw the posted test results, felt like something was wrong, calculated the averages herself, compared them, analyzed them, deepened her suspicion—and decided to clear herself of any doubt before any could surface.

As if she couldn’t allow even the possibility of suspicion in her life—hence she was dragging all of her classmates into it. How unreasonable, and two years later, I still didn’t support her, but I had to acknowledge her sense of pride. Otherwise, she’d come up empty—given the sorry outcome of all her pride, maybe she did anyway.

“‘If we started asking that, there’d be no end to it’? Well, then I find it hard to believe that any study session took place to begin with.”

The outrageous words came from the mouth of Marizumi, one of the students on day duty. A girl who wore a baggy uniform allegedly handed down from an older sister who was on the large side—she didn’t seem to care much about fashion, and her hair was as disheveled as if someone had taken random snips at it with a pair of scissors. Normally treated as a weirdo and kept at a distance. Her statement hushed us for a different reason than Ukitobi’s.

“There isn’t a single thing in this world that we can know for certain. Maybe there wasn’t actually any study session at all. How can we be sure those nineteen people aren’t colluding to tell the same lie?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Marizumi.”

“I’m not being ridiculous. I’m totally serious.”

Not even Oikura’s glare could move her—while Hyoi Marizumi could interact with our class president and not flinch, the rest of us did. We knew there’d be collateral damage.

“Say something, Araragi… Aren’t you the chair?!”

What’d I tell you.

“Um…while I do agree that we should consider all possibilities, the idea that the study session never occurred does seem a little too fantastical…”

“It’s the logically improbable truth.”

“What?”

I was flummoxed for a moment, unsure of what Marizumi had just said—she was trying to shorten one of Sherlock Holmes’s famous lines, but abbreviating it to that degree altered its sense.

“Come on,” intervened Oikura, irritated at me. “You’re both weirdos, you can communicate.”

How Much was going too far with that.

But Marizumi kept a straight face as she responded to the transgression.

“Please don’t lump me together with Araragi.”

It was a lot to take in.

This was becoming a meeting where we took a close look at just how isolated, or even segregated I was from the rest of the class—when a student quietly raised a hand. I assumed she’d speak next, but she remained silent, her hand up. I realized she was waiting to be called on, so that’s what I did as chair.

“Sunahama, do you have something to add?”

“I know it’s an aggravating theory to have to refute, but I thought I’d give testimony that the meeting did take place.”

Sunahama□Ruise Sunahama sounded absolutely fed up. Like she should never have had to carry out the task. As someone who’d been appointed chair against his own wishes, I wanted to express my sympathy. I kept the feeling to myself because she’d probably reject my overture. “What is it?” I instead encouraged her to continue.

“Well, I was on day duty the day of the math final…so I had to get to school early and get the classroom ready. I remember very well how all of you in the study session,” she said, throwing an annoyed glance at Oikura, “had left without cleaning up your mess. I was burdened with putting everything away. Nagagutsu, the boy on day duty, was nowhere in sight, so I ended up getting help from Whip, and Joe, and Hooky, who were also there early. We lined everyone’s desks back up, wiped the blackboard clean, took out the trash, and more. Seriously, can’t you at least clean up your snacks before going home?!”

This was enough to silence even Oikura□up against the school’s closing time, they must’ve just grabbed their things and headed out…

Sunahama, generally the lazy type, couldn’t let the mess stand when it came down to it□the girl was a clean freak, though probably not a germophobe. The study session was inconsiderate to leave the classroom in such a mess the day before a girl like her was on cleaning duty…

Sunahama could be lying had she been all alone, and Marizumi would have cross-examined her, but even the die-hard skeptic would shelve her excessive suspicion if Mebe and Tetsujo (“Joe”) and Fukuishi (“Hooky”) all gave the same testimony. Testimony from Tetsujo, the class mediator, would be especially credible.

Yet none of the three, namely Miawa Mebe, Komichi Tetsujo, and Tenko Fukuishi, backed up Sunahama with any vigor□they didn’t

deny her claim, but that was all. Though a little leery of their muted reaction, Sunahama seemed to chalk it up to their fear of Oikura, the leader of the study session. While that made sense for Tetsujo and Fukuishi, what about the sociable, friendly, precious girl on good terms with the class president? Mebe shouldn't have been afraid of Oikura.

"Is that correct, Fukuishi?" I tried to verify just in case. Asking Mebe directly would have been too obvious—as I expected, Fukuishi nodded meekly. She tended to keep to herself and was never assertive, so you could say a simple nod from her signaled strenuous agreement. This was someone so introverted that it took her more than two months into the school year to correct either her teachers or her classmates on the pronunciation of her name, which had mistakenly been entered as Fukuseki.

Should I seek Tetsujo's verbal confirmation as well? Or should I go straight to Mebe? She might not go into much detail thanks to the awkwardness just moments ago. In which case, she could remain silent even if I asked her.

As I sat there, lost on what to do, a voice cut in: "Let's say there really was a study session—well, I know it did, since I took part in it."

Higuma hadn't even raised his hand. Was he finally making good on his middle-school stint as student council president? Maybe he couldn't bear to watch my hopeless attempt to lead us forward. I was all for it. In fact, he could take my place if he wanted.

"Let's say someone—directly or indirectly—leaked the answers to the study session. The practical issue with that scenario is that we'd notice. It would feel blatant."

"Not necessarily," Waritori disagreed. Having gone to the same middle school, the grumpy girl was relatively mellow towards him (or at least spared him the rod). "Maybe they did it in a natural way so no one would catch on."

"That'd be possible in a group of two or three, but we're talking more than a dozen people. Someone's going to think it's strange.

Getting everyone to memorize the answers outright is clearly out of the question, but slyly imprinting the answers on our unconscious also sounds like a tall order. You can't fool so many people at once."

Higuma, who once dealt with the hoi polloi, which is to say an entire student body when he was student council president, would think so□but in that case, we were left emptyhanded. It'd be like the crime never happened.

But maybe that was fine□and the reason why Higuma was speaking up. Maybe he wanted to settle our meeting that way.

Yet Oikura wasn't having it. She was dead set on continuing the search for the culprit.

"Then let's go over the actual contents of the test. We'll use testimony from everyone who participated in the study session to see how much of what we discussed there appeared on the final."

In order to identify the culprit.

No one leaving the classroom until we did.

015

“So, were you able to figure it out? Sorry, not the culprit, but the stuff about the overlapping questions.”

“No. It’d been a week. It was easy to say, but pinning anything down was impossible because everyone’s memories had gotten fuzzy.”

A particularly unproductive segment of our already unproductive meeting, it was especially vexing for those of us who skipped the session.

“I bet,” Ogi nodded. “That said, the session had an impact on the participants’ grades, right? Out of all the stuff they studied…some of it hit the mark, so to speak?”

“Well, yeah. Specifically, when it came to the bigger questions there were around three that were particularly difficult. We established that most of the participants got them right, while the non-participants tended to get them wrong. I want to say the problems involved limits, indefinite integrals, and probability distributions.”

“Is that the kind of stuff you cover during your first year? I thought those don’t show up until Math III or Math C.”

“It might not make sense to you since you just transferred, but that’s what’s so ridiculous about Naoetsu High’s curriculum. The tests are meant to prepare you for entrance exams from your first year, that’s their policy in fact, college-level higher-math problems crop up on our midterms. We do cover the subjects in class, so some people can solve them.”

“You, for instance?”

“Well.”

Now it sounded like I was bragging. I didn't mean to boast that I could do math…but given how little effort I put into it, I couldn't be modest either. I almost felt guilty, like I wasn't playing by the rules, when she mentioned me.

"As far as those three," I said, "it turned out they did work on similar problems during the study session… We couldn't pin down who brought them up, though."

To be precise, there were a number of suspects, but no evidence. If the person in question denied it, that was that. Denial. Or silence. Naturally, no one wanted to say anything that would cast doubt on themselves—that's where the meeting really started to break down, and there was nothing its incompetent chair could do to stop it.

"At the study session, the nineteen participants taught each other things they didn't understand, working on the kinds of problems that might appear on the test. It wasn't like there were specific 'teachers' and 'students'—but if you had to pick out the leaders, they said there were six."

"Six of them?"

"Right. Oikura, who had the idea for the session. Shui, the class vice president who supported her. The assertive Gekizaka. Shuzawa, who was always eager to teach. Hishigata, the big-sis character. And Higuma, the former student council president. Those six were on the teaching side for the most part. They were the ones who'd have done well on the test anyway—which some people thought made them suspicious."

The thing about those six was that they weren't just smart but helpful—Oikura may have been domineering, but someone who felt only disdain for others would never organize a study session. Sure, some part of her wanted to show off, and the other five's generosity may have come with its own strings attached, but goodwill fomenting suspicion sounded like a raw deal.

"We also started getting testimony that were clearly lies meant to cover for one another—and it was the chair's job to shut this down and keep the meeting going. I can't say it felt great since their

intent wasn't malicious."

"Well-meant lies are trickier than ill-meant truths, huh?"

"More or less. But a lot of problems they tackled in the study session never showed up on the final… If anything, some simpler ones never came up during the session—which does make it seem like it was all just a coincidence."

"A coincidence… Well, yes. That's one possible solution—but not the one you picked."

Ogi was still whispering in my ear and grinning. It was hard to tell whether I was telling the story to her or the other way around given her posture. Did I only think I was narrating to her when in reality, I was listening? How confusing.

But no, this was my tale—and classroom. Wherein I was confined after school that day, wherein various thoughts and feelings were sealed away, and trapped.

"I see, I see. That's what it was—forced to stand in the middle of ugly exchanges, incoherent arguments, and barren squabbles, you developed a real distaste for the creatures called human beings. The well-meant covering-up, buck-passing, and finger-pointing made you despair—and lose sight of justice and generosity and all that. You reached a conclusion: I don't need friends. So many classmates lowering their intensity as humans through friendship was traumatizing—right?"

"Wrong."

"Oh?" Ogi sounded surprised by my denial. Puzzled, even. But then, I wasn't sure how certain she'd been about her reasoning. She was, after all, the niece of that man who spoke like he saw through everything.

"If anything, that's how it should have been. That whole discussion should have made me despair—but some part of me still believed in things like justice and truth. Probably because I was young then."

Young then. Not words an eighteen-year-old ought to utter about

his sixteen-year-old self□would childish have been better?

“In fact, I was vaguely happy.”

“Happy?”

“Covering for each other, trying to end the ridiculous meeting asap, eventually even suggesting you might’ve been to blame□or holding a meeting in the first place to wipe away any doubts, as Oikura had done, wasn’t evil to say the least. Maybe you won’t understand, it might sound like I’m trying to put on a brave face…”

I paused□hesitated somewhat to say the words. Still, I had to. It was deceitful not to.

“I felt like it was the right sort of discussion. We all did, I believe. Even Marizumi, and Yuba, and Kijikiri.”

Senjogahara might’ve been the only exception. I haven’t spoken to her about that time□how did she feel about it? No idea.

“That’s why, Ogi. It wasn’t the discussion that made me despair, but the conclusion. No one saw it coming□we were pursuing what was right, but then made a fatal mistake. That’s when I lost sight of my idea of justice.”

Lost sight of it□I should have refused from the start, and never let Oikura force the role of chair onto me□shaken Arikure off and gone home, who cares what people might think.

“The conclusion,” said Ogi. “But the conclusion was that you couldn’t figure out who the culprit was□sure, a disappointing way for your discussion to end, but falling into despair?”

“Yeah. That’s the thing. We couldn’t figure out who the culprit was□but that’s not to say we didn’t decide on one.”

“Huh?”

“That was the reason for my despair. The reality that people will make decisions about everything, even about things they don’t know□that’s what made me lose hope.”

I lost hope.

To the point where I'd say I don't need friends.

I cut ties.

"I see I see, I see… In that case," Ogi murmured like she was caressing or choking me gently, "how about you tell me what happened next? Isn't it about time to leave school? You've been arguing in a locked room for over two hours, everyone must be near their breaking point. And there at that point…what kind of conclusion did you reach? Where did you end up?"

"…"

"Ahhh, I wanna knowww. What could've happened? I hope after all the twists and turns you managed to blunder your way past your plentiful troubles and paltry turmoil and every last one of you were left as happy as could beeeee…"

"…"

I knew it didn't leave us happy but in that case, how did it leave us?

016

A major reason that actual debates and negotiations don't proceed in the smooth, logical way they do in plays is that people don't listen to each other—accepting neither their opponents' statements nor their right to make them, interrupting before any points can be made, cutting others off with their own, yelling over everything from start to finish. Moving down a terrible path that's the precise opposite of smooth logic, it all brings only fatigue. If you forced me nonetheless to produce minutes for the meeting after that, it would look as follows.

"Whatever, this is pointless. Let's just say I'm the culprit and be done with this discussion." "How is that supposed to settle anything? Are you covering for someone? I bet you know who did it, don't you?" "Is there really a culprit here to begin with?" "We said we'd assume there was while we talked about this. Don't try to make us go back on it." "I mean, realistically speaking, could anyone really steal test questions out of the teachers' room?" "You're asking if it's physically possible, not ethically?" "No, I'm talking about guts here." "Don't be ridiculous. What does that have to do with our discussion? Everyone's lying here, that's all." "I'm sorry, can we please all raise our hands before speaking from now on?" "I can't stand listening to any more of this." "Teachers make test questions on computers these days. You could get them without sneaking into the teachers' room if you hacked them." "You watch too many TV shows." "To repeat myself, I think it was Oikura who taught us the last question on the test during the study session. I'm not certain, though." "If you're not certain, then don't speak up. How would you take responsibility for ruining someone's life? You've always been like that, you know." "Please raise your hand." "Listen, I just want to go home. Can you do this somewhere without me?" "We're not letting you leave." "They might say you did it if you leave." "Fine with me—I just have to be the bad guy, right?" "Gross, stop trying to act cool. What're you trying to pull here? The

other day□” “Higuma would never.” “You were invited to the study session, but didn’t show up. May I ask why?” “Are you really going to suspect me?” “I thought you weren’t that kind of person.” “Excuse me. Everyone. Please settle down. Let’s stay calm.” “How are we supposed to be calm?!” “Haven’t we had enough? If something’s suspicious, why not let sensei handle it?” “I think there’s meaning in trying to correct our own mistakes. We ought to handle our own business.” “I said I don’t have anything to do with this!” “Raise your hand before you speak□” “And anyway, if Araragi got a perfect score, it was possible to solve every problem on the test. Claiming that there had to be cheating or foul play makes no sense.” “Ugh. I’m starting to get annoyed. I want to leave already.” “Leave if you want. Become the culprit.” “What right do you have to talk? You didn’t even get the trig problems right.” “What about you? Who gets the geometry questions wrong?! You could tell the figures were similar just by looking at them!” “Why don’t we do it this way? We put up the names of everyone who got the three big problems right but not the smaller ones, and□” “What’d be the point?” “Why’re you acting like that? Stop being so emotional. Let’s think about this logically, everyone.” “Don’t think. Feel.” “This isn’t the time for jokes, Nagagutsu!” “Senjogahara, you’ve been quiet this whole time. What do you think?” “I don’t know.” “Hey, everyone. There’s something I want to say.” “Say it later!” “Keep your voice down. It’s pathetic.” “Pathetic!” “What are you scared of? Feeling guilty much?” “The one thing we’ve established is that I didn’t do it!” “You’re the only one dumb enough to believe that.” “Excuse me? I’d like you to take that back.” “Araragi, you need to lead us.” “Easy for you to say□” “Couldn’t it have been plain cheating? Like a whole group of students cheating.” “That’d still implicate someone from the study session.” “And the other subjects? There weren’t polarized scores for them, were there?” “It’s not like we had study sessions for them. With a little thought you’d realize that yourself.” “Why should I know?” “So, the culprit didn’t steal any other tests? Why not steal tests for other subjects while you’re there?” “Stop acting like you’re an expert. What do you think you are, a detective?” “Then anyone with high scores in other subjects is suspicious?” “Why did we only have a study session for math to begin with? I would’ve attended a history one.” “Obviously because it’d look bad if the math average was low for a class whose homeroom teacher taught math. In other words, it’s about

appearances. Our dear class president wanted to score points with sensei.” “That’s not why. It’s because mathematics is the most beautiful of all the disciplines.” “You’re literally the only one who thinks that. What does that even mean? Beautiful? So, you just felt like it.” “It always has to be about you, huh?” “I hate math, personally.” “You don’t understand the beauty of math?” “Schoolwork isn’t about love or hate. Why are you even at Naoetsu High?” “What, jealous?” “What’d you just say?!” “Please don’t fight.” “We’re not fighting, it’s because a certain someone is spouting nonsense that it’s weird for me to be at this school□” “I didn’t go that far!” “I don’t care about math, I’m a humanities person. I’m planning on applying to a school that doesn’t have a math exam.” “Oh, me too.” “Stop trying to piggyback on other people’s comments, will you?” “Why are you lashing out at me?” “All of you have gotten so quiet all of a sudden. What gives?” “I’m just staying silent because there’s nothing for me to say.” “I have an alibi!” “An alibi, when we don’t even know when the crime took place?” “I have someone to testify. On my behalf. Someone who’d guarantee I’d never do such a thing.” “What about motive? Would someone do this just for kicks?” “Generally speaking, the culprit wouldn’t stand to benefit if the class’s average score rose. Wouldn’t you normally be happier if the overall score went down?” “Then this isn’t a general or normal case.” “Are you trying to say something here? Out with it.” “I’m saying there isn’t, and there’s nothing I want to say.” “These are leading questions.” “Are you all done yet? I’m sick and tired of this. I had plans to go on a date today.” “Wait, you two are still going out?” “It’s my call, isn’t it?” “Can I take a nap?” “Come on, let’s go through and think about what happened in order. It started with news about a study session getting passed around in class, and□” “Why didn’t that note make it to me? I’d have never found out if Hishigata hadn’t told me. Were you trying to avoid me? Are you bullying me? Do you not like me?” “No, of course it wasn’t intentional… It’s just that you weren’t there…” “Let’s all get along, okay?” “It’s too late for that. I mean, people think I did it! I haven’t done anything wrong!” “There’s no smoke without fire.” “You know, that’s the thing with you.” “Oh?! That’s my line!” “Yeah, why ever have a study session! Studying is something you do alone!”

…No one was raising a hand at this point. It’d become an assembly

where everyone just said what they felt like saying. The template of a fruitless discussion, a space where every line sounded typical and devoid of any creativity. I mentioned plays earlier, and at this point it was like a bunch of hammy actors rehearsing their flat delivery.

We were managing to hurt one another, but without speaking our minds. A true wasteland. A true hellhole.

I remained on top of things as long as it was still one discussion, but once smaller squabbles started popping up, it got impossible to control. I don't mean to justify myself, but regardless of who was chair, it was probably the fated outcome—and in the chaos, I weaved my way through the rows to where Oikura sat glumly.

"This isn't going any further. There's no way to get it back under control." It was 5:58, and I gave her my notice—or rather, declaration of surrender. What I'd been defeated at, I didn't know, but I certainly couldn't fulfill the role assigned to me, out of spite or not, by the class president. "Give me a break. We should end this before it gets any worse."

"What are you whining for? You got a better score than me and you want to give up?"

Oikura glared at me—but her glare lacked the intensity it had at the beginning. She was exhausted, too. While my surrender was nothing more than me throwing in the towel, I also told myself that I was rescuing her.

"That's right. I'm giving up. It's hopeless."

"I'm not letting anyone leave…until we find the culprit."

"There's no way. Everyone's going home once the closing bell rings. You must know that yourself," I leveled with her—maybe I shouldn't have. Someone had to say it, but even if I didn't, Tetsujo or Shui could. That it was me of all people, though, incited her.

I'd forgotten.

Just how much Oikura hated me.

I should have passively, irresponsibly ceded the awful task to someone else. Was I really dispensing advice to her out of some sense of duty? Or was I hoping for something? She simply saw me as a rival, and down deep, didn't really hate me? Was I so conceited that I thought we'd be on good terms one day—since she was just playing hard to get?

The truth was different.

With heartfelt contempt, which surpassed her exhaustion, she spat, "I hate you."

She stood—and made a beeline to the teacher's desk, leaving me behind. She slammed her hands on it to get everyone's attention. She did, yet the commotion didn't abate—which is why she shouted:

"Everyone!"

With this, the room finally fell silent, but everyone looked gloomy and disgusted, and wasn't hiding it—they must have thought that a new chair at this point would do nothing to tighten all the screws that had come loose. I myself felt like reorganizing the meeting would only bring us back to square one—any change in chairs should have come earlier. Just as I expected, Koma, the first student to have complained, was about to lodge another complaint—but Oikura held even that at bay.

"Everyone!" she repeated. "I think we've discussed the matter sufficiently."

Oh, I thought, forgetting her parting show of contempt and breathing a sigh of relief. So Oikura, too, had given up and wanted to wrap this meeting. As the one who'd convened the class council—or perhaps who'd arranged the study session—she was going to draw the line and bring this to a close. We hadn't come to a conclusion, nor had we found the culprit, nor had the culprit come forward, but we all did our best, came together—she'd spout such lines, maybe make us give ourselves a round of applause, and let everyone go. Yes, the mood would be awkward and unpleasant in our class for a while, but she was going to choose the best way to settle this…

Nope, no such luck. She would search for this culprit until the bitter end. A smart girl like her didn't need me to tell her that we had to bring things to an end□but dead set on coming to a conclusion no matter what, if adjourn we must□she said, "So I'm going to take a vote."

Foolish□and irredeemable.

The worst option.

This proclamation.

"We'll decide who the culprit is by majority vote."

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I still wonder—just what kind of result was Oikura hoping for, anyway? What kind of conclusion did she think her proposal would bring us to? Was a conclusion all that mattered to her, even if it wasn't the truth?

You can decide even if you don't know.

Finger, even if things are unclear.

Then again, she said it from the start. The meeting would continue until we found the culprit, or the culprit came forward—she never said it'd go on "until we know who the culprit is."

"…I always tended to be the class loner. One time in middle school, we even had a council meeting about it. Like, to acculturate me, which does sound absurd in retrospect, and as the discussion unfolded, it started to make less and less sense. At some point it devolved into a session where everyone criticized me and my uncooperativeness. I guess meetings easily lose direction that way. I didn't think much of it because by preferring to be alone, I was partly to blame. I had no complaints about the conclusion, either: Araragi should work to get along with everyone. But choosing a culprit based on a majority vote?"

"I see what you mean—but can't wholly dismiss the idea. Jury systems are common in the West, and a lay judge system is taking root even in Japan. Of course, juries require a unanimous decision, and even lay decisions aren't made by simple majority… But if you did discuss everything, maybe Oikura made the right decision," Ogi whispered by my ear, as if to console me. If I wasn't careful, I might let her—but no. That's not how it was. She was just going over the theory—what happened was that we made the wrong decision. I ought to have stopped Oikura, even if it meant slugging her.

Yet the majority vote proceeded.

Not even with a secret ballot, but with a show of hands. Year 1 Class 3 was asked to raise our hand for one of the names she called out in order of roll-call number.

Who thinks no. 2, Koyomi Araragi, is the culprit.

Please raise your hand.

“Huh, really, is that what happened… And the majority spoke and framed you as the culprit—now I see why it wasn’t the discussion but the conclusion that made you despair. Yes, it makes sense for someone to lose faith in humanity in that case. Please accept my sincerest sympathies.”

“No. Oikura was the only one who voted for me.”

“Wha?”

“The majority raised their hand when she called no. 6—Sodachi Oikura.”

It brought everything to an end.

No need to call out the remaining students’ names and ask for a show of hands—even if she’d tried, I doubt Oikura could even speak.

I’ll never forget the look of despair on her face. That despair—must have snagged me as well.

No one ever saw Oikura at Naoetsu High again. Not because she dropped out like Yuba—she was still registered. But she stopped coming to school entirely, for classes or for tests. Despite her absence, she received some sort of special treatment thanks to her smarts and wasn’t held back, and apparently was matriculated in one of the third-year classes—though no one knew which one.

Some said she reaped what she sowed, while others more bluntly called it digging her own grave—and yes, in hindsight, what else did she expect from a majority vote? She’d confined everyone after school, trapping them in a space high on the discomfort index, and

grilled us mercilessly. Something was very wrong with you if you thought it wouldn't result in malice—but realizing that people hate you isn't easy. Just as I hadn't grasped, in any true sense, her violent contempt for me.

I could only watch as she walked into the jaws of death—I couldn't save her. I doubt she wanted me to, but still—shouldn't I have known? How else could it have turned out? Was I hoping to witness the fall of a girl who'd been hostile to me forever? Wasn't I just wishing for that look of despair on her face, which'd be so vindicating for me? No—I was fully convinced I'd be the culprit in a majority vote, and that might have been Oikura's plan. It didn't seem too terrible, actually. Someone who obviously wasn't the culprit being named as the culprit offered a clean conclusion that left the least behind to fester—so much the better since the heinous election would end at no. 2…

My naive read on the situation made me turn a blind eye. In that sense, no. 1 being Ashine also led me astray—no way they'd treat a polite, handsome guy, the peacemaker from start to finish, as a criminal.

But more importantly—the responsibility for her ruin did lie with me if I was the reason why she grew intransigent and ran amok.

I don't mean to say that was why.

I don't—but I started taking even more days off, played hooky more often. Because not seeing Oikura at school left me with this viscous sensation that was a little like guilt.

Also, since that day.

I never once got a perfect score in math.

"Do you really need to feel so responsible? You said from the beginning—Oikura was a prime suspect. Maybe all those votes for her were fair and impartial."

"I'm sure some hands went up for that reason… It was an excellent excuse, but at least a few must've believed it for real—I tried telling

myself that, but remember what I said? She decided on her own to hold the meeting, not because anyone asked her. It was meant to clear her of suspicion because she was a prime suspect… Ironically, it ratified those doubts, but why call for a meeting if she was the culprit? That one fact is enough for me to declare that it wasn't her."

"Heh. I see. Declare, huh?"

"…Anyway, the class council ended up giving birth to a false charge—which, at the end of the day, was karmic retribution. Still—"

"It's more like being hoist by your own petard. Blowing yourself up with a bomb that you set. Hah, what a clown, when I put it that way."

Ogi laughed. It was laughable—Oikura, along with the rest of us, had been in a farce.

Even so, I said.

"Seeing a false truth get forged—witnessing such a stupid decision made everything feel so messed up. It messed me up. The majority, most of the students, raised their hands as one, without any prior arrangement or agreement, not even through glances. That moment when they decided on the truth, and justice was settled—is the scariest thing I ever saw. Speaking of losing sight, that was when."

Losing sight?

No, I lost so much more.

"Until then, I believed in something like the idea of rightness—that there are things in the world that are right, and that it's a question of if you can do them or not. But that's when I learned that no matter how wrong or cruel or stupid, as long as enough people agree, it becomes right."

If a million people approve, even an obvious mistake, a foolish failure, becomes right—the heavens revolved around the Earth so long as everyone in the world believed it.

Majority vote, the ugliest formula ever invented by humanity. The most unjust, unequal formula.

But that was justice.

Everyone said it was right—so it was right.

“Ahaha. What an extreme argument—madly rushing from one extreme to the other. That’s no different from saying everything that sells well is trash.”

“Maybe. Maybe I’m being dumb. But if a million people showed up to agree, even my dumb opinion becomes right. I learned that you can mass-produce all the justice you could ever want—that justice arises from numbers. It’s about establishing a majority. That’s why I chose solitude over establishment.”

I don’t need friends—they’ll only lower my intensity as a human.

That’s—what I ended up saying.

“It was the only way I could protect my own sense of things. My only choice was not belonging to any faction or gang. Of course, it all came tumbling down during spring break two years later… I know it ended up going long, but this has been the tale of Koyomi Araragi. Thank you for listening, Ogi. You know, you said it. It was nothing, now that I’ve talked about it. I feel all better now.”

“Well that’s no good.”

“Hm?”

“I’m saying you shouldn’t be feeling all better quite yet.”

Stepping away from my neck area at last, she quietly appeared in front of me. It’d been a while since I last got a head-on view of her smile—so cute, it was almost uncanny.

“We can’t leave if the tale ends with Oikura not being the culprit—have you forgotten? We need to identify the culprit to exit this classroom. The culprit you couldn’t identify that day—through majority vote.”

We'll have to decide instead.

Or so said Ogi.

Now that she mentioned it, yes. Wait, no, that was only her hypothesis… "You mean Oikura's deep-seated grudge from that day created this classroom? That does make me getting trapped in here seem like fate."

Oikura.

Had she still not forgiven me?

Was she the same as that day?

Did she hate me as much as ever?

I hate you.

"Nah, she's probably forgotten about you. That's how things go."

"Then what about this classroom?"

"Didn't I tell you? I think your mind gave birth to it. That's my definition—a classroom created by your mind, by your regret. If you'd pinned down the culprit that day, Sodachi Oikura wouldn't have met her downfall. And—"

You wouldn't have lost your sense of justice.

It's your regret that created this classroom.

If the school's closing time had never come that day—5:58.

That's where the clock was stopped. Stopped time—suspended.

Time continued to stagnate, for over two years.

"You've been after that sense of justice ever since you lost it that day—and created this classroom to retrieve it."

"I did?"

Was that possible? It's not as if I had Shinobu's power to generate matter, so for me to create a room would be□but then again, every aberration has its reasons. In that case, me being the reason□was enough.

"Okay, but justice?"

We were talking about two years ago. How could we figure out the culprit now, when our whole discussion came up empty back then? Were Ogi and I going to be trapped here forever, unable to leave school for eternity?

No, forget about me, but Ogi didn't deserve this. Even if our misadventure started with her, it was too much for me to bear. In that case, there was only one course of action. No matter how impossible, we had to do what had to be done.

"Okay, we'll redo that meeting," I said. "This time we can't just find someone guilty, we have to find the true culprit□"

"Er, no? If it's the true culprit you want, I already know."

Ogi blithely thwarted□my determination.

"And I think you know, too□who really should have been condemned at the class council. The one who ruined your, as Oikura might put it, sacred math final. That much was clear□from hearing you speak. You feel awful about what happened to Oikura because unconsciously, you know who the culprit is. Otherwise you wouldn't have told it that way."

"Told it□what way?"

"You deliberately hid one piece of info in your account to avoid casting doubt on a certain individual. In that sense, you're covering for the true culprit, whether you mean to or not. You're covering up the truth. That's why you feel so guilty about Oikura, who had to take the blame."

"…?"

Deliberately? Covering up? Don't be ridiculous, what was I hiding?

I'll never forget what happened in that meeting. Whatever I might try to hide, I couldn't.

"Right, you couldn't. It tells me your unconscious knew the identity of the culprit—you've been averting your gaze from it the whole time. Just like Tsubasa Hanekawa used to."

"…"

I didn't get it.

What was this girl saying?

What did this girl know?

"I don't know anything—you're the one who does, my dear senior. Koyomi Araragi."

"I—"

"And with a clearing of the throat, the great detective gathered them all and began—but there's no great detective here, so I guess I'll do it instead. Ahem! Why don't we begin the solemn business of figuring out whodunnit, in part to mourn the idiot, dunce, and fool brought to ruin by the weight of her own sins, Sodachi Oikura, as it is what she too wanted. Oh, I nearly forgot, something does need to be said if this is a whodunnit. Convention is important, you see, whether you're banishing aberrations or solving mysteries."

Ogi snickered at my puzzled look.

Ogi Oshino, Mèmè Oshino's niece and transfer student, turned around—then struck a pose like a kabuki actor, facing no one but the blackboard. I couldn't catch her expression because of the angle, but I could almost see it.

"I challenge the reader."

018

“Komichi Tetsujo is the culprit.”

No preface, no pause, no build-up.

The words casually slipped out of Ogi Oshino.

In response to hearing that the culprit was someone so “unexpected” I was surprisingly unsurprised. It did nothing to move me, my heart was unshaken. Why? It should have been news to me.

Could some part of me have known, like Ogi said? That the crime was hers? And that Sodachi Oikura was a victim, the patsy?

“Shall I continue?” asked Ogi.

“…Yeah,” I managed.

She didn’t need to say more, having spoken the name but I had a duty to listen. A duty, as the tale’s narrator, to hear the truth of the matter to listen rather than tell.

“What made you suspicious of Tetsujo? She was basically in the same position as the rest of us. Sure, her name came up a few more times than average, but couldn’t you also say the less they’re mentioned, the more suspicious? If I was being arbitrary.”

“It wasn’t the frequency my initial doubt involved how many of you there were.”

“How many of us?”

“Thirty-eight. The number of characters who appeared in your tale I counted them. Then I counted them again, so I’m pretty certain. But it doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t? Why not? It seems like a normal number of students.”

“It’s not that.”

Ogi took a look around the Year 1 Class 3 classroom. As if to inspect every empty seat—as if to observe them.

“I believe you said the following, when you spoke of just how isolated you were: whether it was groups of two, three, or four, you were always the one left over. That doesn’t make sense. If there were thirty-eight students in your class, that number is divisible by two, and two students would be left over for groups of three and four. There are no situations in which just one student is.”

Agh—I couldn’t even manage a response.

She was right—and it wasn’t even math, it was simple arithmetic.

“Mathematics isn’t my strong suit. Math III or Math C are far beyond me. Still, I can do division. Well, let’s look for a number that leaves a remainder of one, whether we divide it by two, three, or four. Does that just barely count as mathematics? We simply have to find a common multiple of the three numbers, then add one.”

“…”

“The least common multiple of 2, 3, and 4 is 12. 12 plus 1 is 13. An odd coincidence, given that you were in Class 1-3, but nowhere near enough students. Let’s go to the next common multiple—which we can find by multiplying by 2. 24. 24 plus 1 is 25. A fair number of classes around Japan are that size, but you described the study session as comprising about half of the class. You couldn’t call 19 of 25 ‘about half.’ So let’s give it one more try. Multiply the least common multiple by 3 to get 36—plus one. 37. Thirty-seven. Isn’t that the correct number of students in Year 1 Class 3?”

“There was one outsider in there with us? But think about Oikura’s decree. She specifically said no outsiders allowed, so how—”

“True. There shouldn’t be. But her rule could be taken to mean that it’s fine if you’re a part of Year 1 Class 3. For instance…”

Its homeroom teacher.

Ogi spoke the words with a nasty smile.

“As you noted at the very beginning—you found every last member of Year 1 Class 3 assembled there. Yes, and you used the word member. Not every student of Year 1 Class 3. Of course. You could call your homeroom teacher a member of Year 1 Class 3. It wouldn’t be odd for a teacher to attend a class council.”

“…”

“From there, going back over your introductions of the thirty-eight, you used words like ‘student,’ ‘kid,’ ‘boy,’ ‘girl,’ ‘uniform,’ ‘classmate,’ ‘first-year,’ ‘high schooler,’ ‘club member,’ and so on to describe all of them except for one—that being Komichi Tetsujo. And so, through a fundamental element of both mystery novels and mathematics, the process of elimination—and of non-contradiction—I could identify Tetsujo as the culprit. Oops, should I be using her title? Should I say Tetsujo-sensei? Then again, it sounds like she went by Joe, and you yourself didn’t bother, either. She seems pretty laidback, so I guess it’s fine?”

Ogi grinned, then continued.

“When you said she was on the softball team, you probably meant as its adviser—now really, you talk in such misleading ways. Oh, but you did call her above-the-fray. Was that meant to be allusive, now that I think about it?”

“Nah, I wasn’t trying to be.”

“Haha, is that so.”

“…”

“Furthermore, when the three girls brought you to the classroom, I said that all of the seats must have been filled, to which you said that technically, Arikure, Kijikiri, Tone, and Oikura’s were open—but that doesn’t seem right, does it? It’d be strange unless your seat was open, too—or could anyone have taken in it? Like, say, your homeroom teacher?”

It’s not that Oikura wouldn’t let you sit, you couldn’t to begin with remarked Ogi.

“Just corroborating evidence, of course. A small detail. So, tell me. Is my deduction, that Komichi Tetsujo was not a student but a teacher, completely off the mark? Am I just nitpicking?”

“You got it. You’re right there were thirty-seven students in Year 1 Class 3. There were thirty-eight people at the class council, including Tetsujo, our homeroom teacher. But,” I said, as if I needed to give a forceful rebuttal as if I’d been fingered as the culprit. “Just because Tetsujo was our teacher doesn’t mean she’s automatically the culprit. All it means is that we had a friendly teacher who’d sit in a student’s seat during a class council meeting.”

“The mediator! What a clever way to refer to a homeroom teacher…”

Ogi laughed, almost ignoring me.

Her attitude made me lean forward in my chair. “Hey.”

“Of course, I would have suspected your homeroom teacher even if Tetsujo wasn’t there, even if her name never came up at all. Someone said it as the meeting began to break down, right? Could anyone really find out the questions on a test before it’s given?”

Ogi stepped toward my leaning body our faces were far too close, and I shrank back. Weak…

“It’d be so hard. Sneak into the teachers’ room? Hack the computer system? What kind of culprit would do something like that just for kicks?”

“Teachers are free to go in and out of the teachers’ room, but that’s not enough of a reason to doubt.”

“Please don’t play dumb, not after how far we’ve come this, too, was brought up as the meeting broke down, if I’m not mistaken. Year 1 Class 3’s homeroom teacher was a math teacher. Komichi Tetsujo taught math. Given that position, it’s not an issue of prior

knowledge. She was making the questions. There was zero risk."

Ogi really had listened carefully, to even the smallest details.

An honest-to-God good listener.

"Even if that was true," I said, "how could she get the questions she made to the study session? Tetsujo didn't take part in it. Not that a teacher ever would…unlike with class council meetings. So how did she leak the info? Through whom?"

"She didn't have to go through anyone, and neither did the information. Who was it again, Higuma? They'd have found it unnatural if someone tried to leak the test questions. It was only his impression, so I'm not sure if I should buy it, but his testimony is worth considering. One more thing, an important point□why not leak all of the questions if you're going to leak? I don't see a reason to leak just part of the test."

"If you're going to say that, why leak them in the first place?"

"That will be made clear later. The logical answer would be that Tetsujo didn't disseminate the information to the study session□it was nothing but a wholesome place of mutual learning and betterment. Just as Oikura wanted."

"Then why did the nineteen students in the session□"

"Simple. Tetsujo was in a position to create the test questions. In that case, she just needed to have them match up with what the study session covered."

"!"

An exclamation mark, on cue□but I still wasn't shocked. The very picture of composure, my mind accepted Ogi's "surprising truth."

"Sunahama, on day duty, complained about having to clean up after the study session early in the morning, right? She had Tetsujo and Mebe and Fukuishi help her. What kind of cleaning up did they do? Come on, won't you tell me? How did they clean up after them?"

“They threw out bags of snacks and straightened the desks.”

“The other thing!”

“And erased the blackboard, I guess.”

I’d hesitated to reply—the blackboard.

Yes, in heavy use during the class council meeting—but any study session had to involve examples on a blackboard too. In other words, the participants had left traces of their session on the blackboard for all to see.

The surface of a blackboard is only so large, of course, so they must have written and erased and written again. Not everything they put there would have been legible, but—

“You’d be able to read a portion of it,” I admitted.

“Yes indeed. And if you knew what they went over at the study session, you could create matching test questions. It was the day of the final, of course. Even if you could change the questions, I’m sure you could only change a portion of them anyway.”

So only a portion of the questions lined up with the study session because she couldn’t get a full picture of it from the blackboard—and because there wasn’t enough time.

“We had math during second period, so she’d have reworked the questions during our P.E. test… Could we chalk Mebe’s high score up to the fact that like Tetsujo, she saw the questions while she was cleaning up before class—and they were imprinted on her mind?”

“Right,” Ogi concurred. “She must have realized during the meeting, which explains her discomfort. She must not have wanted to slip up and say anything that’d lump her in with the participants. Of course, there were also some students like Sunahama and Fukuishi who looked at the blackboard and didn’t learn a thing. I think we should call that a show of talent from Mebe.”

True—not every student can get math questions right just by knowing them ahead of time.

“And Tetsujo must have thought so too—I bet she was surprised when the average score went up by so much. Only Igami participated in the session and got a bad score, while everyone else got an 80 or higher? Really? What really blindsided her, though, was Oikura holding this whodunnit meeting. I’m sure Tetsujo’s heart was pounding the whole time—she thought her crime might come to light.”

“…To the point that she couldn’t mediate between me and Oikura.”

I pulled back—Ogi creeped toward me. She continued, a desk in between us, but close enough for me to feel her breath.

“We might also surmise that she took part in the meeting out of fear. In order to lead the discussion if it came down to it, you see. Not that she should’ve been worried. No one is going to think that the teacher, of all people, is the perp—it’d be like the detective or the police being the culprit of a mystery novel, a real blind spot for people. Then again, stories where the detective or the police are the culprit have been done to death. Seriously, did no one suspect the teacher?”

“No one.”

“Other than you.”

“Well, if you’re going to say I did, I’m sure everyone else did too. But we were trying to convince ourselves there was no way.”

Were we relieved, then? That the majority vote came to an end at suspect no. 6? No, it didn’t matter how far down the roll we went, our homeroom teacher wasn’t on it. Her name would never have been called.

“What’s left—um, the motive?” said Ogi. “The motivation behind the crime. Not leaking the questions, exactly, but whatever it is she did.”

“Oh… You promised you’d make that clear later, does that mean you have that figured out, too?”

“It’d be a nonsensical crime for a student. Even for thrills, it’s hard

to figure out a motive. Raising the average score would have the relative effect of worsening the grade deviation among the students, one of the most important methods of ranking them. If I had to come up with something, maybe boosting the reputation of whoever□Oikura, in this case? But then, why convene the class council? As you said, it'd be something she absolutely shouldn't do. But there's one person whose reputation rose if the class average rose□that being math teacher Tetsujo, also Year 1 Class 3's homeroom teacher. It would reflect well on her skills of instruction and guidance□and that was her motive."

"But in that case…"

In that case, she could just tell us during class, "This will appear on the final." Why go to the trouble of lining the test up with her students' predictions□

"No, no. She'd be found out, if she did it in class. It had to be subtle□though she went a little too far. Three questions is too much. She should've kept it to one or two swapped in at the last second□seems she underestimated the academic abilities of her students."

Yeah. It also meant she made light of her own abilities as an instructor□her own class had managed to come up with the problems.

And as a result□

She lost one of her best students.

"Anything else, Araragi-senpai?"

"Why would there be…"

"Ah. Then why don't we get going."

With that□beaming back at me and my curt answer, Ogi hopped away and made her way to the door, with light footsteps, insouciant.

"You can leave now," she put her hand on the door and said.

“Yeah…”

I followed Ogi’s footsteps with plodding ones. Looking down at my wristwatch, I saw that it was 5:58, the exact same time as the classroom clock. The angle of the hands agreed at last, like the stars aligning. Even a broken clock is right two times a day□no.

The clock hanging in the classroom□must have started ticking again.

Like the gig was up.

Because Ogi□because I had come out with the answer.

Because I went and identified the culprit□time resumed.

The bell announcing the end of the day would be ringing soon.

“What do you mean, I can leave?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, it was an odd way to put it… What did you mean by that?”

“Oh. Do you not know? Vampires need permission from someone inside a building or a room in order to enter it.”

“Right… I’ve never experienced that myself, though.”

“Well, Shinobu is a special model. But since you couldn’t exit here rather than enter, I thought I’d try telling you that you could. A little incantation meant to put you at ease.”

“You’re almost making it sound like you were the one who locked me in.”

“Don’t be silly. I’d never lock you in a room. Why would I ever,” Ogi defended herself with a chuckle. “You were trapped by your own past. This whole time, for two years. Isn’t that right?”

“…”

“Just a guess, of course. But think of what it must feel like for a

teacher, someone meant to symbolize fairness to a student, to do something dishonest—and a friendly, trusted teacher who acted as the class mediator, at that. Who could blame you for closing off your heart, out of a sense of betrayal? It destroyed one student, after all—she's been promoted despite her attendance partly because of her excellent marks, but isn't it also atonement on Tetsujo's part?"

"Atonement? No, it's an excuse. She just wants to believe that she's a decent human being," I muttered, in a harsher tone than I expected. As if to distract from this, I put a hand on the classroom door to open it—but Ogi gently laid her hand on top of mine a moment before I could.

What happened next.

You need to tell me.

Until you do—I won't let you leave.

She seemed to be saying this.

"What made me give up…"

So I did. Digging up memories I'd locked away, unable to ever forget, of the meeting that had taken place in this classroom two years ago, on July fifteenth—

Recalling—that majority vote.

The true reason I gave up on justice.

I didn't despair because of the meeting itself—because of the vote itself.

It wasn't the aspect of truth itself.

All right, next.

No. 6.

Who thinks the culprit is me—Sodachi Oikura.

Please raise your hand.

“I gave up on justice because…”

I gave up on justice because.

“There, among all my classmates designating Oikura as the culprit…was Tetsujo, our teacher, her hand raised straight. That’s why.”

The bell rang.

The door opened.

Now let’s go home□the meeting is over.

You can’t stay at school forever.

019

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next day, I was roused from bed by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi, who, unlike me, still believe that such a thing as immutable justice exists in the world, and I headed to school on foot, as I still couldn't buy a new bicycle. I guess it was good for my health. On a whim, I stopped by the AV room before heading to my classroom. More precisely, next to the AV room.

And, as if it was the most natural thing.

There was no empty classroom not even the dead space from Ogi's notebook. Just the AV room, a plain corner room, not even longer than average by the length of one classroom.

Ah, another supernatural phenomenon, I thought, but no, that couldn't be it. Ogi had just measured wrong, that's all. She'd created a nonexistent space in the process of mapping out the school's buildings.

There was nothing here.

Nothing happened here.

No hidden or locked room, no whodunnit.

No surprising truth no class council and no majority vote.

All of it was in the past, over and done.

Still, I thought, I ought to let Ogi know I'd have Kanbaru connect us next time we met since I didn't have her contact info. Musing, I moved buildings and headed to my classroom.

I passed by the teachers' room on the way… Komichi Tetsujo

wouldn't be there. No, she didn't quit out of a guilty conscience or get dismissed after her wrongdoing was uncovered. It was for an auspicious reason, she was pregnant and on maternity leave—loved by her students, she received congratulations from all as she left. She wouldn't be coming back to school before I graduated, even if you didn't take into account the time she'd take off to care for her baby. I doubt Tetsujo and I would ever, in our lives, meet again.

I had no feelings about that.

After I saw her raise her hand from the back that day two years ago, she'd stopped being a teacher or a grownup to me—to be honest, I'm unsure how much of the truth of this case I'd known, whether in my conscious or subconscious mind, but if there was a reason I never spoke about her like she was a teacher throughout my tale, that would be it. Under no circumstances was I trying to cover for her, as Ogi put it. I bet it'd only net me an insincere reply if I told her, though. Ohhh, is that so? Verrry educational.

I walked past the teachers' room with no change in my stride. I arrived at my current, third-year classroom—but as I tried to enter, I nearly bumped into Hanekawa, who'd just exited.

"Ah. 'Morning, Araragi."

"Oh. Good morning, Hanekawa."

"Bad timing."

"Excuse me?"

"It might be better if you don't go in there."

"What?"

"Hup!" Hanekawa separated me from the classroom by pushing me away from it with both palms—the cutest palm strikes ever. Once we'd moved back several feet, she whispered into my ear, "Did you ever notice the one empty seat in our class, Araragi?"

"Hm? Mm. Yeah. I guess… I thought it was a back-up chair, what about it?" I replied, still clueless—an empty seat? "Why, did you

come to class today to find a ghost sitting in it? You'll need more than a ghost to scare me off at this point."

"Not a ghost—a person was sitting in it. A classmate who hasn't come to school in ages suddenly decided to show up today."

"Huh…really? So then the seat belonged to this person. That's a surprise, we had one more classmate than I thought. But why does that mean I shouldn't go inside?"

"Because it's Miss Oikura," Tsubasa Hanekawa said. Solemnly, with a concerned look that seemed to presage a tragedy that was about to befall me. "Sodachi Oikura—seems to have been studying at home for two years, and as if in exchange for Miss Tetsujo, she's back at school. You two are on bad terms, right?"

CHAPTER TWO
SODACHI RIDDLE

SODACHI OI KURA

001

Sodachi Oikura hated me. With the kind of deep hatred you might feel for a homewrecker—in fact, I couldn't help but wonder what you had to do to become so hated, or to hate so much. Think about her position. Hating a specific person to that degree had to be pretty stressful. Granted, I'm not the most likable person, neither too amiable nor attractive—but even then, I couldn't recall doing anything that deserved being glared at with eyes like hers. Well, I suppose there's one reason I'm aware of, which is that I was better than her at math—but it's not as if that actually harmed her. And in retrospect, it feels like her glare was set on me from the first time I met her in Year 1 Class 3's classroom, soon after we entered Naoetsu High—does that sound paranoid? It's not as if she had access to my entrance exam results, I don't even know myself what I got. And anyway, in terms of the final linked to that fateful meeting, I only happened to get a perfect score that time around. It wasn't consistent—she must've had good days during first term and outscored me on quizzes, and math is a broad, catch-all term to begin with. Surely she understood some things better than me.

She couldn't have honestly believed I was to blame for no one calling her Euler. Come to think of it, did a high school girl really want such a nickname? Wasn't it just a pretext? No one can dispute Euler's greatness as a mathematician, but what you go by is something else entirely. I respect Tsubasa Hanekawa, for example, but have no desire to be called Tsubasa or Hanekawa.

Oikura must have misunderstood me.

Just as I misunderstood her.

Misunderstandings tend to multiply.

That's what I think—but there's this other striking thought I have, something else that I think is strange, which is that while Sodachi

Oikura hated me, I in no way hated Sodachi Oikura. I think that's very unusual. In general, it's really hard not to hate someone who hates you. Not that I liked her, of course—I'm not twisted enough to adore someone who glares at me all the time and subjects me to prickling acts of spite that might not be outright attacks. Such high-level twistedness isn't for me. Still, while I found her attitude dislikable, I couldn't say I hated it.

I couldn't.

Why not?

A far more serious question, in a way, than why she hated me so: why couldn't I hate her? In fact, temperamentally and philosophically "incompatible" with the Naoetsu High student body, I might've even held her in relatively high regard, though I'd never go so far as to say I had a good impression of her.

Thinking well of people just because they're great at math, or love math—I'm not so good-natured, or simple. Maybe it was part of why I found it hard to repudiate her. But if I kept her in mind, if my memories never let go of her even after she stopped coming to school, after she couldn't due to her own highly unsympathetic act of self-destruction, it involved something other than academics.

Or so I thought.

Vague, half-formed thoughts—about a girl I believed I'd never meet again. Yet running into her at school two years later forced me to face that old question.

Not just face.

I was pressed for an answer—for a solution. I'd come to know why she hated me, why I couldn't hate her, what she was to me, what I was to her, what we weren't to each other. Truths revealed after two years, as well as truths revealed after five.

Revealed.

And exposed.

Actually, we can cut out the hyperbole and suspense.

I can even divulge the solution right now. Turns out math was entrenched in our conflict, and I was, in fact, a sort of homewrecker to her□or worse. Also: some things, you never forget, and some things, you do forget.

When you can't recall why someone hates you□it could be that you just forgot why.

Mathematically, then.

Or perhaps dramatically, in the manner of a mystery novel, I set forth this problem□prove the following:

Why, when Sodachi Oikura hates Koyomi Araragi, can Koyomi Araragi not hate Sodachi Oikura?

Ignore Ogi Oshino when answering this problem.

002

It can be embarrassing to visit your alma mater—and I confess I'd never once returned to Public Middle School #701 since graduating. Despite it being in walking distance, I didn't bring myself there for nearly three years—then again, it's not like I had any particular reason to head back there after receiving my diploma. Only natural. I hadn't belonged to any sort of club I could go back and visit as an alumnus, either.

In fact, you could say I'd started to forget that I was ever a middle schooler—but after taking one step through its nostalgic gates, a torrent of memories came rushing back to me. I remembered so many things all of a sudden—good things, bad things, things that didn't matter, even awkward things.

I remembered.

What the disconnected memories had in common was probably embarrassment—but to my chagrin, none of the roused remembrances were of what Oikura hinted at.

I couldn't conjure or come up with anything.

"Heheh. This is where you went to middle school? No wonder it feels so stately," Ogi said, grinning next to me. Her attitude made it hard to tell how serious she was being, and I wondered whether she got it from her uncle.

There was nothing stately about it. MS 701 was as bland as could be. It was a plain, ordinary middle school in a provincial city, unworthy of special attention.

Then again, I did think it was special just because I'd gone there.

Is that what Ogi was getting at?

“It feels a little strange, though,” I said. “Even after I graduated from it, this middle school is still right here, doing its middle-school thing.”

“Of course it is. What kind of place exists for no one’s sake but your own? Just because a place is important to you, that doesn’t mean you’re important to it□you’re such a fool.”

A true fool, laughed Ogi.

Fine, maybe it was laughable□better than leaving her at a loss for words. It was about four in the afternoon, and the students, done with classes for the day, stared at us with suspicion as we stood by its gates. They left school like it was the most natural thing to do, the way I had□and tomorrow, they’d return like it was the most natural thing to do. Believing the cycle would last forever, not yet knowing that it’d come to a sudden end as soon as they graduated□

“Um. Remind me, do your two honorable younger sisters deign to grace this place with their presence?”

“Why so excessively polite when you’re talking about my sisters? No, they don’t□they’re at a private school.”

“Ah, right. Tsuganoki Second Middle’s Fire Sisters, was it? By the way, what is Tsuganoki Second Middle short for?”

“Tsuganoki Middle School #2… Anyway, my friend here at MS 701 is called Nadeko Sengoku, and…uh oh. Should’ve contacted her ahead of time so she could accompany us.”

Graduate or not, I felt a little awkward walking into the school. Any way you cut it, it’s such a crazy world out there. I probably wouldn’t be treated as some kind of suspicious individual, but some teacher might say something if we wandered about too much.

“We’re fine. Stand tall, there’s no need to be afraid. Just pretend it’s three years ago,” encouraged Ogi. Reservations about high schoolers stepping foot into a middle school weren’t for her□unlike me, she’d been a middle school student until the previous year. Maybe it wasn’t very worrying for her.

Still, and also unlike me, MS 701 was in no way her territory. She was totally ignorant of the place, never having seen, heard, or been to it before, so it made sense for her to be a little anxious, and yet—

“Haha! When you put it that way, I’m ignorant of most places. I don’t know anything,” Ogi said and resumed walking, with her small stride. “Let’s go. It’s far more suspicious for us to vacantly linger by the gates—you don’t want them calling a policeman on us, do you? We’ll be swift. In, and out. What you might call a touch-and-go. The shoe cupboards, was it?”

“Oh, yeah. The shoe cupboards.”

Ogi was on her way, and I followed behind, flustered. Like the day before, when I was locked in a room with her, the decisiveness and speed with which she acted was amazing. As someone liable to get lost in his own thoughts and entangled in speculation, her recklessness had me wrapped around her little finger. You could say she had me off balance—feeling the need to reclaim my status as her senior, I overtook her with long, fast strides.

“The shoe cupboards—that’s what Oikura said. Not that I’m positive she was telling the truth. This is Oikura we’re dealing with, she might’ve told some sort of irresponsible lie to torment me.”

“An irresponsible lie—that does seem possible. Yes, it does indeed. There are just so many liars out there in the world.” Ogi seemed to be enjoying herself. I won’t say she was acting like this was a picnic—it wasn’t her problem at the end of the day. “This shoe cupboard, then, will be nothing but a bunch of wasted leg work. Still a worthwhile afterschool activity, to have gotten the opportunity to accompany my dear senior Araragi.”

“Stop sounding like Kanbaru with that ‘dear senior’ and ‘opportunity to accompany’—why’d you ever respect me?”

“Please, be a little more self-aware. The stories I’ve heard of you facing aberrations here in this town for the past half-year make you worthy of quite a lot of respect. Are you trying to get me to go down the list, one by one? You must remember it all, it’s in your bones.”

“In my bones.”

“Yes. I’m talking about your memories.”

“…”

True, I couldn’t claim the memories weren’t a part of me—I’d just have to overlook how unmistakably influenced by Kanbaru she sounded.

Overlook, or maybe put up with, or maybe ignore.

It was an issue I’d have to deal with someday, but the one I needed to address at the moment was Sodachi Oikura.

A serious issue I couldn’t simply put up with—an issue thrust before me with all the weight of her sudden appearance at school after two straight years of absence.

I couldn’t approach this with my guard down.

Sure, Oikura coming back to school before graduation and for the first time since that meeting was something to be celebrated, but—

“Heheh, what a strange coincidence. I suppose these things really do happen. You told me about her, and you were reunited the next day—a twist of fate indeed.”

“I admit I was surprised… I didn’t even know we were in the same class.”

That I didn’t was a shock in itself, of course, no matter how uninterested in my surroundings and disconnected from my class I might be. When I went and checked, though, her name really was on the roll. As this year’s class vice president at least in name, you could call my oversight a blameworthy case of negligence. Did I deliberately ignore it? Had I not noticed because—doing so would remind me of that day and the class council?

Of those memories?

“Heheh. Heheh. Heheheheh. Oh, life is just one surprise after the

next. You never know what might happen—which is why it's so much fun."

"I'd call it the opposite of fun."

Ogi seemed to be enjoying herself, but my heart was actually quite heavy—if what happened today was continuing on into tomorrow and beyond, this was no time to be worried about entrance exams. Right, what if today was just a warm-up—I had to deal with this asap, before the main event began.

"And thus—the getabako."

"Yeah. The shoe cupboards."

They weren't "geta boxes" anymore—no middle schooler was going to wear wooden sandals to school in this day and age (I doubt the regulations even permitted it).

Ogi and I entered the building—and arrived in front of the shoe cupboard in question. Well, Oikura hadn't directed me to the cupboard itself—but its contents.

Inside the cupboard…

"So, which one is it? Which did you use when you were a first-year?" asked Ogi.

"Oh… If we're looking for the first-years' corner…" I replied, guiding her.

Maybe corner wasn't accurate ("area" would be more like it), but what could I do? The word came to my mouth and slipped out in the moment. It wasn't worth correcting—so I led Ogi. Yes, around here, if nothing changed since my days…

"It's actually surprising how well I remember—it's like my body does, rather than my mind." The school's very existence had been hazy to me until just moments ago, but now that I'd gone and stepped foot inside, it was as if my feet knew the way—they moved of their own accord.

“Heheh. Is that so? Well, I understand the feeling, as someone who’s transferred all around□a memory that seemed to be nowhere in your conscious mind getting dug up all of a sudden. It really is such a flimsy thing… You think you remembered, or recalled, something, but that could be far from the truth,” Ogi said. Her strange and bothersome remark made me all the more anxious, but I identified the space I undoubtedly used at the time.

I identified it.

This seems obvious, but it was another student’s now, so it wasn’t as if the label read “Araragi” like five years ago. Still…

“This is it, huh? The spot where the new middle schooler Koyomi Araragi swapped his outdoor shoes for indoor slippers each and every day□how moving.”

“Moving? Me swapping one pair of footwear for another?”

“What kind of young gentleman were you?”

“Young gentleman…”

I was a middle schooler.

Come on.

That said, a high schooler can’t help thinking of a first-year middle schooler as young. And in fact, I was such a child then that I acted painfully childish□take the way I saw truth.

Or justice. I never doubted their existence.

I’d resolved to always do the right thing. Yes, just like my younger siblings, the Fire Sisters.

A bloated self-consciousness□what’s more childish than that?

“Oops. You’ve gone quiet all of a sudden. Is something the matter? Oh, you. Staying silent like that, you seem all the more manly. You’re going to make me fall in love with you at this rate.”

“Um, no…”

“You realize you’re in for a rough time if I do fall in love with you.”

“Yeah, I can definitely see that one.” I don’t know, but somehow hearing her praise me wasn’t embarrassing, unlike with Kanbaru. Part of it is that Ogi was clearly teasing me (or being malicious)—in that sense, I guess Kanbaru’s bombastic accolades were convincing (sincere?) to some extent… “I’m just wondering what to do—we’ve come here, just like Oikura said, but what’s next?”

The shoe cupboard. Inside—the one I used as a first-year middle schooler. I felt compelled to come and see, but now that I was here, all I remembered was its exact location.

This was our terminus—a dead end.

Why did Oikura want me to come here? Well, not that literally checking out my middle-school shoe cupboard was the point… But then, what was she trying to tell me?

“What next? There’s only one thing to do next. Look inside.” Before I could stop her, unhalting, untroubled, and unstraying, Ogi—put a hand on the space I used during my first year of middle school.

She popped it open.

Even as I turned pale, taken aback—yes, according to Oikura, the contents were the issue, so we’d have had to at some point. But it belonged to someone else now—an adorable (or maybe not) first-year middle schooler, a stranger. Entering the grounds without permission was a problem to begin with, but we were dealing with a student’s shoe locker here. You didn’t have to be particularly considerate of privacy issues to know it shouldn’t be tossed open, thus my cold feet. I’d felt like our investigation had hit a brick wall, but Ogi had gone up to this wall, to this terminus and dead end, and hopped over it with ease like a hurdle in an obstacle race.

Fearsome, the Oshino bloodline.

They didn’t think twice about jettisoning a little bit of their ethics for the sake of an investigation—I had a similar thought the day

before, but she really was born to be inquisitive.

Prompt in assessment and decision.

Her capability for resolute action seemed to engulf all else. Couldn't she at least warn me first, though?

"Haha. You say that, but don't tell me you were going to wait for the student whose shoe box this is to show up, so you could explain the situation and ask for permission to look inside."

"Um, that seems like a sensible plan to me?"

"You're so patient□one of your virtues, but no matter how patient you are, time waits for no man. If we lay in wait for a middle schooler, we'd be full-fledged suspicious individuals at that point. Think about your bright future, which you'd be throwing down the drain."

"Okay, but isn't it an even bigger problem to open a middle schooler's shoe locker without permission?"

"It's okay, I'll lie if they find us and say I wanted to drop a love letter into the kid's box. There's no law out there that says I can't lie, not when the world is so full of liars. You can be my trusty senior who agreed to tag along with my timid self."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, a good setup. I like my role, too. But you know, Ogi, it might be a girl using that box now, given the penmanship."

"Then you were the one planning to drop off the love letter. I'll be your junior who's tagging along."

"A high school senior bringing along one of his juniors to drop off a love letter to a first-year middle schooler? Feels like you've flipped a great setup into an awful one… Come on, that's too fatal a drop for me and my role."

"Ah, what's this? There are indoor slippers in here, which means its current user has already left. It'd have been impossible to get permission in advance. Why care when you get results. Hm? What do we have here?"

Having noticed something, she stuck her hand inside. My request flew into the ether as Ogi, for whom “not caring if you get results” was a commendable attitude, moved once more to promptly assessed and decided action, but what could it be? Something suspicious about the slippers?

What she extracted from the cupboard, however, wasn’t footwear.

Three.

There were three envelopes.

“En…velopes?”

Huh?

We’d been kidding, but love letters, in this day and age? Billets-doux? And three of them? What, was the user of this box, mister first-year middle schooler who’d already gone home, popular with the ladies?

Kids these days…

Was he the protagonist of a light novel?

Was that kind of story unfolding at my old middle school?

“Mmm, no. Sorry to interrupt you when you’re feeling so giggly, but these don’t seem to be love letters and they’re all from the same person, anyway.”

“All three? Well, if that’s what you say… And also, I’m not feeling giggly, but whatever, you shouldn’t be grabbing someone’s private correspondence. You need to put them back right now.”

I had to scold her. We hadn’t come to my alma mater to infringe on the privacy of middle schoolers.

Yet she was utterly nonchalant. “I dunno. Take a look at these envelopes they’re labeled a, b, and c in big letters on the front. By hand, too. The handwriting seems to belong to one person, but who’d use this kind of lettering on a love letter?”

What kind of love-lettering would that be, Ogi mumbled.

Yes, it did seem off, or rather, odd—all the more so since each letter was written exactly as you'd see it in math class if it were a variable. Now, first year of middle school, that's right around the time you go from arithmetic to mathematics, which meant it was about when you'd start using that kind of notation—still, hold on.

"Still, you shouldn't look at someone's private letters without permission. Listen to me, I don't care if it's for the sake of fieldwork—"

"But…these letters are addressed to you."

Ogi turned the envelopes around.

And yes, it said: To Koyomi Araragi, 1-3.

All three of them.

"What…"

"Hmmmmm. What could we possibly have here? My, myyyy, how straaaange. Ohhh, it just doesn't make sense," Ogi cried out with an unsettling smirk—and that's when I remembered, like I'd been hit by a bolt of lightning.

What Oikura was trying to say.

I remembered.

Almost to the point of forgetting everything else.

How true.

It really is such a flimsy thing—human memory, as dodgy as my life itself.

003

The memory I'd recalled was still a chaotic mess—so let me first explain the situation to you. It had led me to visit my alma mater, with all the embarrassment and nostalgia that it entailed.

The morning after I escaped from a classroom after being locked in with transfer student Ogi Oshino, I walked through the halls on my way to class when Hanekawa stopped me. Because Sodachi Oikura was inside, Hanekawa said—because she had come back to school for the first time in two years.

"You two are on bad terms, right? I just thought it might be better to mentally prepare yourself first."

I could expect no less from a class president among class presidents.

Tsubasa Hanekawa, the class president of all under heaven.

Her thoughtfulness about such matters was impeccable—I'm sure that class council wouldn't have ended the way it did if she'd been the president of Year 1 Class 3. Surely we would have avoided that tragedy. Of course, if she'd been in our class, the true culprit might have been identified on the spot… How might things have gone then? I wouldn't call it the better outcome without any reservations.

Every student from that meeting, myself and Senjogahara included, kept our mouths shut about what happened. Hanekawa couldn't have known—but it seemed that my differences with Oikura were well known to begin with. Some people at that meeting even theorized that I brought about her downfall—however much it upset me to hear.

Hanekawa didn't take the opportunity to ask me, "Araragi, what happened between you and Miss Oikura?" Maybe she thought it wasn't a topic she ought to dig into—even so, it was a pressing

matter.

If Oikura and I caused some sort of issue in class that was too big to overlook, Hanekawa would interrogate me and Senjogahara, aggressively too.

That'd be no good.

I didn't want people knowing about that meeting.

I didn't want Hanekawa knowing I, of all people, had been the chair. Hanekawa being Hanekawa, she wouldn't castigate me—if anything, she'd gently admonish me, but I still didn't want to tell her. I didn't want to talk about this lightheartedly, nor, for that matter, with a heavy heart.

In fact, I was needling myself over the way I'd blabbed on to Ogi the day before, when I hadn't even told Shinobu about what happened two years ago—regardless of how necessary it may have been to escape from that locked room.

I had to maintain the most peaceful relationship possible with Oikura now that she was here—Hanekawa wouldn't launch an investigation if I led a regular, trouble-free life. Did I also need to make sure Senjogahara kept her mouth shut? Not that I knew how she felt about that incident…

She thought about things in a different way than she did back then, anyway.

"Ha ha ha!"

I let out a strained laugh.

Hanekawa, you're worrying too much, it was meant to say—but fell flat. She stood there looking at me like I was this bizarre thing. The kind of look you'd give a friend who started acting crazy—just how forced was my laugh?

I continued, "It's nothing worth worrying about." I considered clearing my throat, but didn't. "Bad terms, maybe, but that's two years ago, the distant past. I don't have any concerns. None at all. I

appreciate the consideration, but I could've walked straight into that classroom and nothing would've happened."

"Hm. Hmm. Really?"

"Uh huh, really. And I'm sure she's forgotten about me, too," I guaranteed as Hanekawa seemed to ponder the situation.

This too fell flat, only making her needlessly suspicious. I venture to say this because of her reply.

"Well, Miss Oikura asked me. About how you're doing now, what you're doing now, what you're like now."

She super remembered me. And she was super obsessed□scarily enough. Suddenly, I didn't want to walk into my classroom anymore. I'd have done a U-turn and headed straight back home if I didn't have to worry about my attendance.

"She wanted to know if you'd gotten taller, what you have for lunch, and around what time you get to school."

"That's a lot of questions…"

"I did answer her, of course, as long as they were harmless. I thought it'd be strange if I didn't."

"Wh-What do you mean, harmless?"

"Stuff everyone knows. Like how you're the vice president, or how you've gotten your act straight lately… That much."

I didn't tell her about Shinobu, or about aberrations, of course□Hanekawa assured. Right, that wouldn't be harmless. Afflicting, more like.

"Also, I didn't tell her about Miss Senjogahara because the situation seemed somewhat fraught□after all, she hasn't come to school yet. I do think you ought to set a goal for before she does arrive, though."

"A goal?"

“I’m suggesting that you talk to her. You’re classmates. You can’t spend the remaining months together without ever coming in contact. Yes?”

“Hmm…” Wow, she saw through my plan of trying to ignore Oikura for the rest of the year? Surely our classroom offered some sort of dead angle□

“I can’t have you ruining the mood of the class, either. Even if Miss Oikura holds some sort of a grudge, if you’re as unconcerned about her as you say, you should be able to meet her halfway.”

How could this be happening. She’d used my own words against me.

Halfway? If her attitude towards me was the same as two years ago, it was all scorched earth… Who knew what kind of minefield I’d be walking into.

I’ve heard some landmines are designed not to deliver lethal wounds and just blow away your legs and make you suffer as much as possible…

Hanekawa wanted me to step on it?

“But Araragi, wait just a sec, okay? I need to talk to our homeroom teacher about the reinstatement process for Miss Oikura□at the teachers’ room. Would you like to come with me? You’re the vice president, after all.”

“Mm…”

Oikura hadn’t withdrawn from school, so “reinstatement” was just a way of speaking. Still, Hanekawa stepping away for a moment provided me with an excellent opportunity, especially if Senjogahara hadn’t arrived yet□if I went in now, I wouldn’t have to mind anyone else.

A perfect chance.

Once in a lifetime.

Having to mind only two pairs of eyes said something about my life, but didn't make it any less of a rare chance—so I cordially declined Hanekawa's invitation (though, cordially or not, I was in a sense neglecting my duties).

"I'll resolve everything with Oikura by the time you get back," I said. "There's only half a year left until we graduate. I'd like to enjoy my youth, you know?"

"Hm… You've really grown, Araragi."

Hanekawa sounded impressed, but it was a stopgap measure at best—and I had no way of making good on my promise that I'd resolve everything before she returned.

004

I entered the classroom—the “empty seat” kept open for Oikura all this time was pretty far from mine, giving me some degree of comfort.

Given what Hanekawa had just told me—and even if that wasn’t the case—I couldn’t ignore Oikura. Still, I assumed I could at least place my bag down at my seat, sit down, and breathe for a moment. The plan was to inspect Oikura while doing this, then come up with a plan based on her attitude and mood. I’d be jumping the gun in a sense, kind of like how people who’re quick at doing calculations start thinking about how to solve a problem before they’re even done hearing it. Unfortunately, someone called me on my foul. No, that’s not accurate—because I didn’t even get a chance to execute my so-called plan.

Oikura had taken my seat.

It didn’t matter if Hanekawa told her or not, because really, she could ask anyone where I sat and they’d tell her—it wasn’t as if no other former Year 1 Class 3 students were in our class. Well, actually, even if she did ask someone, I doubted she’d ask someone from 1-3. She’d probably avoid them.

Oikura would.

In any case, I tried to pull off a feint, but she’d gotten the jump on me—or rather, it felt like she’d jumped me, and I had to admit, it did feel strange. Yes, Oikura hated me since long ago, but was it to the point that she’d try to pick a fight with me this openly? You could almost call it an attack. How was it any different from physical violence? She seemed to be challenging me to battle—I considered answering this declaration of war by going over to her seat (the one that had always been empty) and sitting in it, but allowing myself to be provoked would only drag me into a

quagmire. On second thought, it was times like these that called on me to be a cool and collected gentleman. I calmly walked with the most graceful of steps toward my seat and Oikura like a movie star on the red carpet, or perhaps a bride down the wedding aisle.

You can tell by my nonsense metaphors that I was in fact quite shaken, but in any case□

“Hey, you know that’s my seat,” I said.

Calmly.

As calmly as possible.

“Hm? Hold on. Aren’t you Oikura? That’s right, you’re Oikura! Whoa, what a surprise! Oikura, my old classmate from when I was a first-year, two whole years in the past! I wonder if you remember me. You’ve probably forgotten me, but you know, number two, Araragi! Number two!”

My entire profile consisted of my roll-call number.

And, while I meant for this self-introduction to cleverly imply that yes, How Much, I know that’s how little I’m worth to you, she only replied, in a low voice:

“…I remember. Of course I do.”

Not just a low voice, the lowest.

The kind of voice that might arise from the lowest depths of hell□over the past six months, I’d faced countless crises, squared off against no shortage of dangerous characters, and could say without exaggeration that I’d been pushed to the brink of death again and again, but this voice made me want to flinch.

All my experience meant nothing□what exactly had she gone through?

“How could I ever forget you□Araragi.”

Oikura let out my name with so much hatred that I bet she’d speak

the devil's name with more cheer in comparison. She more spit it out than let it out, leaving no room whatsoever for compromise. This wasn't scorched earth, this was like a barrier.

Or maybe just a deep ravine?

"I'm glad you remember me… Yes. That makes me, Araragi, roll-call number two, happy," I said as I observed Oikura, whom I was seeing for the first time in two years. She seemed to have grown, though that seems obvious enough she'd gone from being a first-year high school student to a third-year high school student. Her details were a little more childish in my memories, but that seemed to have disappeared entirely. As far as changes, though, the most prominent of all was her gaze the gaze she summoned to glare at me.

Her gaze.

Now even sharper than two years ago it seemed to have a keener edge to it. Unless her eyesight had gotten worse from spending the past two years playing too many video games, her hatred and revulsion for me must have grown the entire time negative growth, as they say.

More than her body had grown which was fine, but why would her hatred toward me grow?

It's not like we'd been meeting or anything.

"So. You're sitting in my seat," I repeated patiently.

Don't ever get impatient when you're dealing with wild beasts fall into agitation or panic and you doom yourself to be eaten. Most important of all, remain unshaken and unperturbed before a predator.

"You seem to be doing well, unlike me," the predator said, ignoring my words.

She offered a meager smile kindly teaching me that smiling isn't always a sign of good intentions.

“Of course, my life is a total mess thanks to you.”

“Thanks to me?”

I didn’t know what she meant—was she talking about the class council meeting? No, how did that make sense? Sure, Oikura stopped coming to school, and that might have made a total mess of her life, but the unanimous opinion was that she’d caused her own downfall. She’d reaped what she sowed, and shouldn’t be holding a grudge against anyone. Don’t tell me she believed the theory that I’d intentionally brought her low? Did she even think that I was the true culprit?

How ridiculous—I thought, but it belonged to the realm of possibility. This was, after all, about what someone believed, and anyone is free to believe anything.

A solo majority vote always ends in a unanimous decision.

If Oikura thought I was the culprit, I was the culprit.

If Oikura thought I caused her downfall, I had to accept that fact—

“Looks like you’re leading a happy life,” she continued.

I noticed there was something unnatural about the way she spoke—a weak vibrato, like she wasn’t too used to talking, as if she didn’t have full control over the volume of her voice.

She hadn’t come to school for two years, and perhaps hadn’t talked to anyone in a while. In that case, saying anything too stimulating was unwise—though it was hard to say at this point what would constitute a wise move.

I guess neither wisdom nor moves had been a big part of her life for some time…

I began to regret not going to the teachers’ room with Hanekawa, but as it always is with regret, I was too late.

“I’m so jealous. You were studying, trying to get into college, and finding a girlfriend while I shut myself in at home. It’s all been

smooth sailing for you, hasn't it?"

"Yeah. Thanks," I said, the most I could muster in reply.

It seemed she'd asked more than just Hanekawa about me—studying was one thing, but Hanekawa wouldn't babble about me wanting to go to college and other private stuff. She told me she'd left out Senjogahara, but it wasn't as if our relationship was a secret. Someone else must have brought it up. It didn't take a masterful investigation.

But there was something unhealthy about Oikura.

Something extremely sick.

She'd come back to school after two years, and the first thing she did was ask everyone about me—didn't she worry about the kind of impression it gave? Going around and asking about Koyomi Araragi? In fact, her eccentric behavior bothered Hanekawa to the point that she decided to caution me in advance. Not that I didn't seem to be making an active mockery of her advice.

Oikura was a pretty harsh person two years ago, not easy to get along with, but I didn't recall her being this poor of a communicator, this incapable of managing her relationships with others.

Had that incident changed her, after all?

Or perhaps set her down a rather distorted path—twisted and turning.

"Thanks? Thanks? Hah… What did I do for you? It's not like I was here at school."

"No, I meant…"

Now she wanted to nitpick my empty platitudes?

Not to mention, it felt more like her nails digging into me than her picking nits.

“Hmph,” she snorted. “I’m sure you could get into any college you want, if you felt like it.”

“I-I wouldn’t say that, I’m in a real rough spot,” I shrugged and replied jokingly to her words soaked in□no, dripping with sarcasm. The real rough spot I found myself in was keeping the mood from growing dark, not that my efforts were paying off.

It went beyond me. The air in the entire room felt suffocating□I almost wondered if the oxygen around us had been replaced with precious metals. Not one student in class chatted away. They all seemed to be focused on us.

My reputation was going to take yet another hit.

I was doing all the right things, and yet my reputation was going down the drain? How unfair.

“No need to be modest. You’re still good at math, aren’t you?”

Oikura said this sneeringly. The snide remark seemed to be no motive and all malice.

“You must think ‘Euler’ suits you better than it does me.”

“…”

There was something laughable about the way she fixated on this point, and it seemed even dumber when that piercing glare accompanied it□if you want to know what the object of that piercing glare thought.

“Well, I guess you could say I’m good at math, or more that it’s my one lifeline.”

“Still getting perfect score after perfect score?”

“No, as far as my scores□”

I couldn’t say it. That of all subjects, I’d never gotten a perfect score in math since that day□I had the experience lately in other subjects, math was the only one where I couldn’t make it happen.

Or shouldn't.

A compulsion coming from somewhere.

From somewhere? No, I knew where.

It came from right here.

"And you have a girlfriend now? That must be thanks to math, too."

"No, that's a bit…"

Of a stretch.

At the same time, I realized that while Oikura's questioning may have turned up the fact that I had a girlfriend, she didn't seem to have learned it was Senjogahara.

Because Oikura wouldn't have let that go if she'd known—how could she ignore the news that Koyomi Araragi had captured the heart of Hitagi Senjogahara, the cloistered princess, the flower in a bell jar?

What a stroke of luck. Perhaps whoever told Oikura that I had a girlfriend sensed something disquieting, either from the start or as they spoke—disquieting, or some sort of unusual vibe.

In that case, I resolved anew, I at least needed to get her out of my seat before Senjogahara got to school—but ultimately, it's not as if my mere resolve meant anything.

"It's all thanks to math," Oikura repeated nonsensically. "Punks like you really grind my gears—I could have all the resentment in the world and it still wouldn't be enough. My hatred for you just keeps on bubbling up whether I want it to or not. A bottomless spring of disgust."

"Punks like me… Gosh, that's a little extreme," I attempted to mollify the now openly hostile Oikura. To keep us on a peaceful, or at least conciliatory path—yet she only kept her sights trained on me. In fact, her expression grew even harsher.

“I hate you,” she stated.

The same words I’d heard in that classroom two years ago.

“I hate that attitude of yours—wrapping everything up in a nice, noncommittal way. You try to compromise, to smooth everything over, just like back then, when—” she said before gulping her words.

No, it seemed more like she’d lost them when they got stuck in her throat. This girl who hadn’t done much speaking in a while had apparently messed her throat up by suddenly taking a furious tone.

In fact, she had a mild coughing fit.

I approached her, concerned, but—

“Don’t touch me,” she rejected me.

This is what it meant for someone to be brusque.

“I don’t want someone like you worrying about me—what good could possibly come out of that?”

“Is that so.”

I stepped away. As requested.

I got to thinking.

Just like back then, when—Oikura had said. Back then naturally meant when I was a first-year. Did she mean the way I tried to bring the meeting to an inconclusive end?

Speaking of, she reached the decision to take a majority vote after learning of my stance. A decision, or maybe a boiling point—maybe she felt some kind of unjustified resentment over it? Unjustified from my point of view, of course, while she surely saw it as a legitimate grudge. Spending two whole years keenly aware of her grudge would explain the way she glared at me now.

It was unreasonable—but not unjustified.

“I-I hate you. I hate you. I hate you, okay?” she went on, like some firebrand trying to win over a crowd—like a dam had burst, spilling out words.

Her own words lit a flame in her, drove her into a frenzy.

“I don’t even want to see your face. The fact that you exist in this world at all is disgusting.”

“That bad…”

You have no choice but to go on the defensive when someone attacks you to that degree—I felt my emotions cooling off. Faced with a wild beast, I effortlessly fell into a state of calm serenity. Settled into, more like. Her rant was appalling and left me cold—but it was also fear, a cold sensation in my guts over not knowing what to do, or what she might do.

She was comical in a way, hating me to this extent, so it was possible to see her as foolish, but I couldn’t laugh at her so easily. Even if I did, it’d surely be forced.

Just like Oikura’s agitation.

My laugh would be peculiar.

“Seems like you really hate happy people.”

I wanted to ask her why she bothered coming to school if she didn’t want to see my face, but that was like telling her to go home after she’d finally decided otherwise after her long absence. Instead, I tried to evade her attacks by generalizing.

But no, she shook her head as if I said the stupidest things.

“I like happy people.”

Right, she’d refute anything I said at this point. She’d say left if I said right, down if I said up—but she seemed to mean it.

“Seeing them makes me happy—what I hate are people who don’t know why they’re happy. People who don’t even try to consider

why they're happy."

"…"

"I hate water that thinks it made itself boil. I hate seasons that think they came about naturally. I hate the Sun for thinking it rises all on its own—I hate it, I hate it, I ha-ha-hate it—I hate it. I hate you."

Oikura's eyes glowed.

Like they were aflame—like they were inflamed.

I had no idea anything could glow in such a disgusting way.

"I hate it hate it hate it hate it hate it. I ha-ha—hate it. I hate everything. I hate it, no exceptions. I hate it, no takebacks. I hate it, I hate it—I hate the hate of hate that hates hate because hating hate hates hate."

"Oikura…"

Oh crap—I thought. I was wrong, totally wrong.

It was the kind of mistake you make when you're being attacked—you're the underdog being viciously harassed by someone with an advantage over you. If you don't strike back, if you don't stand strong, you're going to let yourself be mauled—no, maybe mistake is an overstatement. I'd be beaten into submission if I didn't strike back and stand strong.

Oikura was certainly being hostile toward me.

Her attitude was threatening and aggressive—but even if it meant getting beaten into submission, it should've been unthinkable for me to strike back at her.

It'd be a different story if this was the Oikura from two years ago.

But I couldn't now.

I mean, now she was—fragile.

Almost like a piece of glass. If I tried to strike back and defend myself in the wrong way, the slightest nudge from my hand could shatter her into a thousand pieces. Who knows what would have happened if I dared tell her to go home? What could I do or say to someone coming after me in such a perilous emotional state?

Even the way she took my seat for starters might have been more defensive than offensive, a way to protect herself and her mind.

She lacked any and all equilibrium.

I felt, well, awful.

She'd been so cool and commanding, but now appeared this weak and frail I'd have preferred the return of a more aggressive Oikura.

A former foe returns, but weakened who wants to watch a drama like that?

She was no wild beast.

She was like a scared little animal.

If anything, it was Oikura who saw me as a ferocious, wild beast.

The predator.

Touching her would leave me hurt, but shatter her.

This difference in power forced me to go easy on her.

"Why aren't you talking? Don't tell me you're feeling sympathetic, Araragi. You, feel sympathy for me? Your suh-sympathy isn't worth a cent to"

"Hold on, Oikura. Ho-o-o-ld on. Calm down. I'll leave for a bit, okay? Cool your head while I'm gone. You can keep on sitting in that seat…"

My attitude only seemed to irritate Oikura she stood up indignantly. The way she stood the moment I said it was okay to sit was, in a sense, consistent, but this was no time to be impressed.

“Araragi. You-you, don’t know anything—you act like you do as you live your comfortable little life, not even considering why you’re happy. You don’t know—you’ve forgotten. College exams? Girlfriends? Duh-d-d-d-don’t give me that crap.”

“A-Again—Oikura.”

I didn’t think I was giving her crap, but nothing would come out of arguing here. Perhaps the biggest load of crap to her was when I tried to act serious. Not to mention, it’s a terrible idea to contradict someone who’s emotionally off-balance—I had to affirm everything coming out of her mouth, just as she denied everything coming from mine.

Or so I thought, but she wasn’t even letting me affirm her. Or speak in the first place. She interrupted me as I tried, endlessly unfurling her pet theories and personal opinions before I could so much as nod.

“It’s because people like you are in power—that I’m never going to be saved. I hate people who think they’re the only ones responsible for the way they live—who think they can live all on their own. I hate people who flatter themselves by thinking they can make it on their own if it really came down to it—people with the nerve to say they don’t need anyone’s help.”

“…”

“You can never be happy unless someone saves you—I hate idiots who don’t even realize that, I hate them so much it’s killing me.”

What had driven her to this point?

That class council meeting?

The two years of depression that followed?

Or something else I wasn’t aware of…

“I-I agree, it’s important for people to help each other out. Yeah, Oikura, you’re right, people never go and get saved on their own, definitely not. I’m always thinking the same thing, those ungrateful

people who think they're on their own are unforgivable—"

I'm probably not cut out for flattery. To think that going along with someone's opinion could be this hard… But permit me to make the bare minimum of an excuse—no one could stay on the same page as Oikura here.

"You're the unforgivable one, Araragi. No one is more ungrateful than you. You're complacent—I mean, what about your idea of justice?"

"Justice?"

"Or are you telling me you don't remember? What was inside that shoe cupboard during our first year of middle school?"

What was inside the shoe cupboard.

The words came from nowhere.

It felt like the flow of our conversation had been interrupted—what was inside that shoe cupboard during our first year of middle school? What was that supposed to mean? I couldn't figure out what the words meant beyond a literal level—at all. Oikura looked almost triumphant when she noticed my bewilderment.

"See? I knew it. You don't remember a thing. You don't know what you're made up of."

What I'm made up of.

I didn't know.

Why did the words strike so hard—pierce my heart, even. And come out the other side.

"Oikura, what do you mean by—"

"Nothing. Because I hate meaning. I hate everything. I hate hate and hate and I hate the hate of hate of hate at the hate in hate—I hate hate hate

Now this was going too far.

Though I'd unfortunately seen people in her state multiple times—and while I knew it was better to just let it all come out, we were in a classroom with all these pairs of eyes surrounding us.

I could end a little quarrel or argument by saying I was in the wrong, no matter how it unfolded—my reputation be damned.

But this kind of fierce, almost panicked paroxysm would ruin Oikura's reputation. How could it not? Our class already had preconceived notions of her, the way she'd come to school out of nowhere after being absent for all this time.

Sodachi Oikura.

I needed to find some way to calm her down.

The thought drove me to hold her shoulders as if I were supporting her. I tried to shake her and speak to her with whatever words came to mind. But before I could say anything—not that I knew what to say, and the only correct course of action might have been to sprint away at full speed—Oikura screamed.

"I told you—don't touch me!"

She sounded like a child.

And acted in the thoughtless manner of a child—atop the desk Oikura occupied, my desk, sat a ballpoint pen. An extra-fine ballpoint pen—I didn't know why it was there. The only explanation seemed to be that someone just so happened to place it there, and true, it was the kind of ballpoint pen you might find sitting around anywhere in a school. Oikura grabbed it and swung it at my hand, which was on her shoulder.

"Mgh!"

Well.

I wasn't trying to act tough or anything (why do that in front of Oikura now?), but if I'm being honest, I think I could have dodged

it.

It was a ballpoint pen swung by a high school girl, and a diminished one at that, after the fierce battles I'd experienced over the past six months—and yet, its tip pierced the back of my hand.

It didn't make it out the other side, stopping when it hit the knuckle of my middle finger—which gave me some comfort. Had the tip fully penetrated my hand and stabbed into Oikura's shoulder, there'd have been no point in choosing not to avoid it.

I can say this with confidence.

Had I let go of Oikura's shoulder and evaded the pen, she'd have stabbed her own shoulder with it—so thoughtless, spontaneous, and reflexive was her act.

It actually helped her regain some degree of her senses.

"Oh…" she said, betraying a glimpse of regret.

Still, I wasn't in a place where I could attend to her. I had to hide the wound as soon as possible for two reasons.

The first, of course, concerned Oikura's future—she'd performed the brutal act out in the open, but our classmates had been watching our argument from a distance. They should buy that she never stabbed me, that she stopped just short if I hid the wound… Well, could buy it. The other reason was extremely self-serving—the wound would heal in no time at all due to the vampiric aftereffects lingering in my body.

It'd be a problem if they saw it healing.

I never imagined I'd sustain this kind of damage in a place of learning, but whatever the case, I really needed to get away from here, now, while Oikura sat dumbstruck. Then—

Hiding the back of my hand, I spun, but had to stop my feet from moving. I had to stop them, or they just stopped. Not just my legs, every one of my actions.

My escape and thought processes.

Because her form came into sight□the form of Hitagi Senjogahara as she opened the door and entered the classroom.

From there.

With the flat affect she once carried herself with□with a flatter affect than ever before, Senjogahara looked at my hand, pierced by the pen, as well as Oikura.

“…”

What now?

005

Upon further inspection, a body resembling Hanekawa's clung to Senjogahara around her hips. And looked exhausted. A fairly rare state to see the class president in, but the sight of her gave me more or less of an idea of what had happened. In other words, what took place somewhere else before Hitagi Senjogahara and Tsubasa Hanekawa's arrival.

After we parted ways, Hanekawa must've conducted whatever procedures were needed to reinstate (?) Oikura in the teachers' room, and while I have no way of being sure whether it happened before or after she finished her business there, she had a chance encounter with Senjogahara, who arrived at school. More of an ill-fated encounter, considering Hanekawa's current state—but in any case, she must've told Senjoghara about Oikura coming to school. Naturally, Hanekawa at least knew that Oikura and Senjogahara were once classmates—and maybe the conversation even led to her stating that Oikura and I were meeting now.

Hanekawa wouldn't have said this with any sort of urgency, but from the point of view of Senjogahara, who knew of the "differences" between me and Oikura on a deeper, closer level than her, it'd have sounded like a notice of quite the storm brewing.

And she'd sped to the classroom like the wind—dragging Hanekawa along. It seemed her legs were every bit as powerful as when she was the star of the track team—or maybe she'd built them back up to that level? In any case, Senjogahara (and Hanekawa) appeared in the classroom at the worst possible moment.

"You're fucking dead," Senjogahara said.

I'd like you to note that the words came from her after she seemed to have turned a new leaf. It threatened to undo all her work until now, but she was just that full of quiet fury.

“Only I’m allowed to stab Araragi with stationery□no matter how much of that character I’ve abandoned, I won’t stand for any reuse of it.”

That’s what you’re mad about?

Be mad that your boyfriend got stabbed.

“M-Miss Senjogahara, please wai□”

In spite of her ragged state, Hanekawa did a laudable job trying to fulfill her duty as both class president and friend, but regrettably, she lacked the physical strength.

Senjogahara walked straight toward us.

Ready to throw herself straight into a sea of mines.

“Miss Senjogahara.”

And then.

Oikura noticed□her former classmate.

As president and leader of Year 1 Class 3, Oikura had to remember a classmate as distinctive as Hitagi Senjogahara, the weakly honors student.

I had no idea what kind of relationship Senjogahara, once considered untouchable, used to have with Oikura□but whatever friendly relations they may have once had, even if they’d been the closest and best of friends, weren’t about to resume now.

The air was just that tense.

On Senjogahara’s side, of course□and on Oikura’s as well.

“Oh. So that’s how it is. I get it now,” Oikura said. A contemptuous smile crept onto her face. “You’re going out with Araragi□how far you’ve fallen.”

“…”

This actually had the effect of bringing Senjogahara back to her senses. As someone with crisis-management abilities and observational skills far superior to mine, she must have instantly recognized Sodachi Oikura's mental and emotional state.

She recognized the danger—the fragility there.

An aggression built upon weakness that permitted no counterattack.

The old Senjogahara would have surely gone right ahead and opposed Oikura, but—

"Miss Hanekawa. It's fine. You can let go of me," the "fallen" Senjogahara said. "I'm sorry. It was nothing."

"Are you sure?" asked Hanekawa, having been dragged all this way, as she moved away from her hips. The most right-minded, good-hearted person here, she had drawn the short straw.

"It's fine. Thank you. I'm always grateful for your self-sacrificing friendship."

"You're very welcome…"

"As a show of gratitude, I'll be your hug pillow one of these days."

"I don't know about saying that at school, Miss Senjogahara…"

I promptly hid my stabbed hand behind my back.

Hanekawa gave me a questioning look, but even in her exhausted state she wisely decided that now was not the time and returned her gaze to Senjogahara, Oikura, and the tense situation between them.

It almost seemed like a face-off between the two stationery girls, new and old—but Senjogahara was already somewhat relaxed. This, however, seemed only to goad Oikura.

Of course—she hated everything now. Was there anything that wouldn't goad her on?

“What do you mean, it’s nothing? Are you saying that I’m nothing? Just look at how great you’re doing now. You used to be a useless sick girl who couldn’t do a thing unless I took care of you.”

“You seem terribly busy holding me up and bringing me down□Miss Oikura. But yes, it’s true that you did a lot for me. You never punched down,” Senjogahara said flatly.

It brought me back□but her affect, or lack thereof, seemed somewhat strained. She was puffing herself up in a way, when she didn’t need to, and it was to maintain some kind of balance with Oikura.

“Not that you have the capacity for kindness towards anyone now, sick or not.”

“So are you better, Miss Senjogahara?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

This thank-you seemed to irritate Oikura once again□I’d given her my own empty thanks, but apparently she hated hearing the words.

“Did Araragi decide to apply for college because you’ve been looking after him? If that’s the case□you ought to stop, it’s pointless. He’s never going to appreciate it no matter what you do for him. He thinks he lives his life all on his own. No matter how much you do, he’s going to keep on thinking that he did it all thanks to himself.”

“Well, you might be right.”

Hey now.

Don’t just accept it, I thought□but like me, Senjogahara must have felt that contradicting Oikura now was a bad idea. Maybe what looked to be a solid discussion had already collapsed, and the issue at hand was how to bring this situation to an end.

A way to lower the curtain.

Ultimately, the only way was to tear the curtain to

shreds—notwithstanding Hanekawa's presence. I shuddered with fear when I thought about all that implied.

"But really, it doesn't matter—it's not like I'm seeking a reward. What I want is for Araragi to attend college with me, so I'm not going to hope for anything beyond that."

The ironclad assumption was that she would get in (she could talk this way because she was all but guaranteed recommendation-based admission)—and something or other, possibly the part about not "seeking a reward," ticked off Oikura. She flew off the handle yet again—and sent her palm flying toward Senjogahara.

A slap.

Fortunately, there was no stationery nearby—fortunately for Oikura, I mean. Because Senjogahara's counterattack would have surely involved that piece of stationery.

Devastating, in her hands—even an eraser dealt more damage than the strike she did deliver in return, with her fist.

"Mgh!"

The entire class fell silent.

I, who was too late to stop them, and Hanekawa, who foolishly believed Senjogahara and let go of her, and our classmates, who watched at a distance, and of course the clobbered Oikura.

She crumpled to the floor and didn't get up.

While you might call this the rare example of rock earning a win over paper, Senjogahara, the winner—despite being as expressionless as she had been in her old days—looked like she knew she'd done something wrong.

Well, yeah. You can't rock someone with a punch like that…

"Araragi," Senjogahara said in a quiet voice only I could hear. "I'm going to pass out too, so please take care of the rest."

What?

Before I could finish reacting, she fainted on the spot like an anemic student passing out during morning assembly as the principal gave one of his long sermons.

With an even more dramatic noise than when Oikura collapsed.

And she'd fallen completely unconscious, not so much as breaking her fall.

It was such an impressive display of playing dead that even I had trouble telling if it was real. Was she a ladybug or something?

And with this, the early-morning commotion came to a shocking end, with two girls pitifully splayed on the floor.

In other words, Hanekawa, the class president, and I, the vice president, had been left to handle the aftermath□but I'll skip over what happened next. As a true devotee of Tsubasa Hanekawa, I don't want to have to depict her swamped and exhausted.

006

With the flashback over, we'll move back into the present. In other words, after school, visiting the shoe cupboards of my dear old alma mater, Public Middle School #701, in order to learn the truth about Oikura's weird remark.

"Wait, what? That's strange, how does that flashback explain why you're here at this middle school with me, Ogi?"

"Oh, you. What are you talking about? You know, you always say the funniest things. I, your laudable junior, came to thank you for what happened yesterday, and that's when you told me about this, remember? And then, my humble self presumptuously proposed that you try visiting your former middle school. I couldn't simply ignore what came from a proposal I made, which is why I'm accompanying you, however pushy I realize that may be."

Who knows, maybe I might be able to help you in some way by being here Ogi said.

That's what happened? Really?

But, well, I couldn't think of a particular reason for her to lie, so it was probably true. How careless of me, I'd rushed to tell someone about my battle with Oikura? Maybe I'd started to open my heart up to Ogi after being trapped alongside her the day before. If so, Koyomi Araragi was being quite sociable toward a transfer student he'd only met a day ago.

Not that it was a change for the worse.

With my doubts fully dispelled, I turned my attention to the three envelopes addressed to me that had been in my former shoe cupboard.

Three letters to me in a middle-school shoe box I hadn't used for

nearly three years since graduating—the situation was already out of the ordinary at that point, but there were also the letters on each envelope.

The letters a, b, and c—written by hand, had shaken my psyche to the core.

Sodachi Oikura.

They reminded me of her rant—the three alphabetic marks made me recall something I'd forgotten.

"What could this mean? Oh, I just can't figure it out. I'm sure these letters are to you, but why send three letters at once to the same person? Ah, what a mystery—there is that classic masterpiece of detective fiction that gets brought up all the time, 'The Purloined Letter,' but this is more like 'The Conjoined Letters.' It would be interesting if they were advance notices of a crime, though."

"You don't have to stretch the situation to make it sound like a mystery. Or to bring up what you call an over-referenced story yet again."

Yes, I remembered now—I remembered that much. How I acted next, faced with another set of three letters five years ago.

"Ogi—it's not complicated. We just have to open the envelopes to solve this mystery."

"Really? Then let's take a look," Ogi said, unsealing one of them.

She was as unhesitant as ever, but when I say she unsealed one, I don't mean she ripped it open. It was kind of girlish, the way she carefully peeled it open. I won't say that I did rip them open five years ago, but I must've been a little rougher… Anyway, she opened the a envelope.

"Hm?" Ogi tilted her head as she looked at the piece of paper inside. She didn't need to show me. It must have read:

"The b envelope is the wrong one. Will you switch your choice to the c envelope?"

Yes, how could I forget.

Down to the details of the phrasing—every last part of speech.

If anything, I couldn't figure out how I'd forgotten it all until now…

"What does this mean? I don't have a clue, it doesn't make any sense—is this some kind of code?"

"It's more of a quiz than a code."

"Why would you say that when you haven't even looked at it?"

Ogi handed me the note—it read exactly as I thought it would, and the childish handwriting was also just as I imagined. If someone told me it was the actual letter I'd received five years ago, I'd almost believe it—but that couldn't be. How could a letter from five years ago be here?

…But then, where had I put the letter?

The letter that changed my life when I received it.

Where had it—disappeared to?

Why had I—lost it?

"Your expression says that you expected this, but what about it is a quiz? It talks about switching to the c envelope, but I don't know what it means for b to be the wrong one to begin with."

"This is a famous puzzle known as the Monty Hall problem. A game of probability that any math enthusiast has come across," I explained.

Giving Ogi the same explanation I once received.

"The Monty Hole problem? Huh? Something to do with astronomy? Like black holes and white holes—"

"No, Monty Hall. It's the name of a television program and doesn't have anything to do with the actual question. It's one of many

probability problems with an answer at odds with your intuition.”

“At odds with your intuition? Like a paradox?”

“I guess you could say that…but it’s not technically a paradox. Nothing about the answer contradicts reality.”

The Monty Hall problem.

There are three doors, A, B, and C, and a fabulous prize is hidden behind one the player first chooses one door out of the three.

After the door is chosen, the host of the program opens one of the other two doors. It’s the wrong door, and the player learns this fact. Given this information, the player is allowed the opportunity to choose a second time stay with the door you picked, or switch and pick the remaining door.

That is the puzzle, in a nutshell.

“Huh,” Ogi nodded.

As a good listener and someone with good comprehension, she now had a rough understanding of the game, I assumed. At the same time, there was also a slight sense of “So what?” about her. Perhaps she wondered what about this game was so exciting.

So, to encourage her.

“What do you think?” I asked.

Just as I once was.

“Um, what do I think? Well, I understand that the letter inside envelope a is imitating this puzzle.”

“What would you do, Ogi? You picked envelope a and now you’ve been told that envelope b is wrong. Will you switch your choice to c?”

“Ummm.”

Ogi looked back and forth between the empty a envelope and envelope c. She thought for about five seconds before saying, “Isn’t the probability the same either way?”

Yes, the answer that puts her right in the asker’s trap—but also the answer that anyone, including myself five years ago, would give at first, without a significant background in mathematics.

“If you don’t find out the answer until later, and only one of A, B, and C is the right choice, then each one has a one-third chance of being right,” Ogi said. “It’d be a different story if you found out that B was wrong before you made your first choice, of course.”

“Yes. But changing your answer here is the right choice—switching from A to C.”

“Is that really true?” asked Ogi, politely. Her curiosity didn’t seem particularly piqued. And, well, the concept behind the question gets a little confusing when you start talking about shifting probabilities, boring anyone who was never interested.

It greatly piqued my curiosity five years ago—but it was a bit unfair to expect the same kind of excitement from Ogi.

“Why does that happen? I sure would like to know. Won’t you tell me?” she said, sounding like she didn’t really care.

Her consideration made me happy, but I wished she’d be a little more considerate with her consideration.

While it hurt to be acting like a math nerd giving a fiery lecture to a bored audience, I had to if I were to connect the topic to the three envelopes. I pretended not to notice Ogi’s listlessness.

Acting like I wasn’t sensitive required some sensitivity.

“The most popular explanation is to ask you to imagine this problem with a hundred doors, not three. Choose one door out of those hundred that you think the fabulous prize sits behind.”

“Okay, chosen. Now what?”

“Of the remaining ninety-nine doors, ninety-eight are opened and shown to be wrong—you don’t know if the one remaining door is right or not, but what would you do if you were allowed to change your selection?”

“In that case,” Ogi said pensively, looking at the shoe cupboard. Perhaps she was overlaying a mental illustration of the Monty Hall problem on top of the long row of boxes—something I didn’t have the quick wit to do in the past. Whether or not she had an interest in math, Ogi did seem to have a nimble mind in general.

If only one of the boxes is the right answer—and you chose one—and then you were left with only one other option, shown that all the rest were wrong—

“Well, I guess I’d change my pick in that case.”

“Right?”

“But you’ve changed the problem,” she made her dissatisfaction clear. She wasn’t buying my explanation—of course, I did expect this to some extent. “Picking one door out of three and having one of the other doors disappear doesn’t seem like the same problem as picking one door out of a hundred and having ninety-eight of the others disappear.”

“Well, yeah…”

It’s obvious in this case that the one final option, the survivor of 1/99 odds, seems more correct than the 1/100 choice you first made. But it’s hard to go from that and successfully appeal to someone’s impression that the same goes with three doors for the same reason—naturally, because the problem has to do with math, not impressions.

“Then let’s go with the solution that I heard.”

I decided to back down and try another approach—sometimes a detour can prove to be a shortcut.

It seemed to be the quickest way. The shortest path isn’t always the most expedient one.

“First, let’s think about if A is the right answer. In this case, switch choices and you’ll always be wrong. It doesn’t matter whether the game show host opens door B or C, the player is guaranteed to lose by changing doors. Therefore, not switching is the right move—therefore, it’s better not to switch if A is the correct answer. Right?”

“Yes. I get that.”

“Then let’s think about it when B is the right answer. The host has no choice but to open door C if the player has chosen A, one of the two incorrect doors. In other words, the player only has two choices, A or B. Switch and you’re right, don’t switch and you’re wrong—so it’s better to switch if the answer is B.”

“I see. Well, I get that too.”

“Finally, when C is the right answer—this follows the same pattern as when the answer is B. Given that the player has chosen A and the right answer is C, the host can only open door B. This gives you the two options of A or C, where not switching is wrong and switching is right, making it better for you to switch.”

“It—does?”

“Imagine the paths toward getting the answer right for all three cases, A, B, and C. There are two cases where switching is better, and one where switching leaves you worse off. In other words, not switching gives you a one-third chance of getting it right, while there’s a two-thirds chance that switching is beneficial.”

And of course, the calculations are the same if the player picks door B or door C—which is why the optimal action for the player to take in the Monty Hall problem is to change their selection.

This proof left my first-year middle schooler self in shock—but while I wouldn’t call Ogi’s reaction apathetic, it was still on the level of, Ah. Okay, I understand.

So it didn’t leave a high schooler stunned… Yes, maybe these kinds of math problems hit hardest when you’re in late elementary to

middle school. In that case, I'd encountered it at the right time.

Well, maybe not encountered.

I was introduced to it—taught it.

By the individual who had left three envelopes in my shoe box.

"This is kind of an aside," said Ogi, "but did this TV show know this when they ran the game? Was it a program meant to amuse viewers by letting them watch players be fooled by their human instincts into being unable to pick the optimal solution?"

"No, apparently not—it seems like no one thought a player could double their chances until it was pointed out in a magazine, not the staff working on the show or its viewers. I guess you could say that's weird…"

It really was weird.

Why else would someone come up with a game involving such odd mechanics—if they thought that your chances stayed the same, how would the game be any different from just choosing one door out of the three? Even if it was meant as a kind of countdown, it seemed so meaningless.

It had become a famous question, the Monty Hall problem, precisely because someone had shown its solution to be so counterintuitive—but the problem existing in the first place felt like some sort of nauseating inversion of ends and means, almost like if aberrations existed prior to aberrational phenomena.

As if children existed before their parents, and that's what was truly weird about it—how had the creator of the problem come up with the game?

"Heh. I see—well, I guess it's suggestive."

"Hm? What's suggestive of what?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just talking to myself—for now. No need to worry, we're not going to get to that for a while. So, to summarize and

apply this to the envelopes, you're saying that it's the right answer to change our selection from a, the first envelope I opened, to c."

But I already did open the a envelope, didn't I, Ogi pointed out mercilessly. I wished she'd overlook the fact. These three envelopes weren't some kind of project put together by a TV show—that wasn't who sent them.

The person who did, through my shoe locker, was a first-year middle schooler at the time, like me.

"In that case, let's open the c envelope—let's play right into expectations. And what's this? A map? There seems to be some kind of marking on the map, too," Ogi said in an overly explanatory style. She didn't delay opening the c envelope for a single moment once she knew it was the right answer. Though I wasn't fully on board with it, I could learn something from her drive.

Had I possessed half of her drive during that morning's commotion, it never would have ended in that awful way. I'd have been able to stop Oikura, or if not her, then Senjogahara—

"In other words, we should go to the place shown on the map? Huh… It doesn't seem awfully far. This isn't—a treasure map, is it? And by the way, what was in the b envelope? Let's take a look."

Ogi briskly opened the b envelope as well.

What drive…

She had no intention of playing by the rules—or rather, she was playing by an entirely different set of them. Firm rules, rules that made any others just about meaningless.

"Oh? This envelope was empty from the start. Does that mean it's the wrong choice? Hm—the Monty Hall problem. But this entire chain of events only worked out because we opened the a envelope first. Wouldn't it not make any sense if I'd started by opening the b or c envelope?"

"Well, yeah—but it was unlikely that you would. If you have three envelopes marked a, b, and c, most people are going to start by

opening a."

"Ah, is that so. Yes, yes, I see. Hmm—what a clever grasp of human psychology. And look at me, I went and sided right with the majority. It seems that whoever placed these letters in your shoe box had a lot of confidence in their own intellect. Though I don't see the sender's name on either side of the envelopes."

So, naturally, Ogi continued.

"We're going to the place shown on the map next—a journey tracing your memories. We're on a tour, tracking a young Araragi's footsteps."

"Yeah… That's right," I said, reminiscing.

Actually, we could just cancel the tour then and there, now that I remembered most of everything that had happened. In other words, I could tell Ogi that our journey had come to an end, and perhaps that would have been the right thing to do as her senior—I'd made her tag along for my sake. But I couldn't stand not going, not after coming this far.

Going there—going to the place that a young Araragi frequented every single day one summer.

I had to go.

"Let's, Ogi. To the coordinates shown on that map—wait, what?" I found myself saying again. Because at some point, she'd disappeared from in front of the shoe cupboard—no doubt acting before waiting to hear my reply.

Come on, give me a break.

Cutting short my attempt to look cool…

Just how aggressive could one person be? And why bother checking with me if she was just going ahead with it? What was she doing ditching her travel companion, even if we were at my alma mater? All this ran through my mind as I chased after Ogi. She might already be past the school gates with that drive of hers, I thought.

But I didn't have to exhaust myself going after her, she'd stopped only a little ahead of me.

Had she decided to wait on me and my slow decision-making abilities?

She stood at the shoe-cupboard corner for the second-years.

Vacantly staring at one of the labels.

"Sorry to make you wait," I apologized. She'd been the one to go ahead without asking, but I wasn't about to criticize her for that.

"Oh, no, it's fine, you fool. Don't you worry," answered Ogi, before starting to walk again. I'd gotten pretty used to the way she called me a fool, but it did surprise me when it came out of nowhere.

"Hm…"

I passed my eyes over the nearby boxes and found Sengoku's name on one. Well, of course, she'd have one since she was a student here but□hmmm? It kind of seemed like Ogi had been staring at this particular one□was I imagining things?

007

Ogi and I followed the map contained inside envelope c to arrive at what might be called a flag lot in a new housing development not far from Public Middle School #701. Standing there, surrounded on all four sides by homes, was a dilapidated house. So perhaps it would be more accurate to say it was crumbling there, not standing there—in botanical terms, it seemed withered. Yet this derelict building was the exact place frequented by first-year middle schooler Koyomi Araragi.

“Hm. Could this be like the abandoned former cram school that I hear my uncle used as his bedroom while he stayed in this town?”

“Ah…yeah, I guess so.”

True, this secluded, rundown home did bring to mind that no-longer-standing building. You could even say the two places were just about as deeply memorable to me.

But. That said. I went to that abandoned building so many times to visit Oshino, to give blood to Shinobu—so why hadn’t I ever thought about this place? It seemed completely reasonable to make the association at least once.

I couldn’t help but be puzzled.

Now Oikura’s words made sense.

She hated water that thinks it made itself boil.

She hated people who don’t know why they’re happy.

Ungrateful people who lived their happy little lives—now I understood.

She was exactly right—neither more nor less. It wasn’t any

exaggeration to say that by completely forgetting about this dilapidated place, I'd forgotten why I was me.

It was like carrying on with my life having forgotten the name of my parents.

How embarrassing—no.

How shameful.

Was this what Ogi meant moments ago by "suggestive"? Aberrations existing before aberrational phenomena—but as far as she was concerned…

"It's so rundown it's dangerous. It's at the mercy of the elements and not even being maintained. I'm a germophobe, unlike my uncle, so I could never live in a place like this. You've got to be kidding me."

She didn't hesitate to slander wholesale a place that held a treasured spot in my memories—I'd be lying to say it didn't offend me, but how convincing would a scolding be from someone who'd forgotten about it until just moments ago?

It'd be brazen—transparent and shameless.

Not to mention, unlike her uncle, Ogi was young and innocent. Only natural for her to dislike a place like this.

I spoke.

Recalling the figure of a girl—of that girl.

"I used to meet a girl in this deserted place…"

"Hm. Why would you do that?"

While my words brimmed with emotion, Ogi's were rather sharp. Her tone lacked any trace of sentiment. She seemed to find this crumbling home extremely displeasing—but not enough for that spirit of investigation at her core to shrivel. She took a look at the nameplate at the gate as soon as she detected a break in the

conversation.

She took a look, but there wasn't any plate where one ought to go, only an old piece of rubber tape, rudely stuck there. We didn't even need to try the intercom next to it to tell that it was broken.

"Since there's a trace of a nameplate, this place must have been a regular home, right? I mean, there are nothing but homes all around it."

"Who knows," I answered. "I'm not that familiar with this area. I never was. I was never aware of any nameplate as a middle schooler." Ogi really was sharp. Even if we couldn't press the button on the intercom, she knew which buttons to press when it came to fieldwork. "But it was to do homework, rather than fieldwork, that I frequented this place. A home, huh…"

I looked at the crumbling house again. Despite having slept over in that abandoned cram school like Oshino, I hesitated to walk inside. More because it seemed in danger of collapsing than for any sanitary reasons□but I hadn't come all this way just to look at it from the outside and turn tail.

There was no getting off this ride□or rather.

What goes up□must come down.

No, maybe I was only digging myself in deeper here…

"You know, I called it a haunted house back then."

"Heh. A haunted house□that you visited every day for a whole summer? How spooky. Our tale's suddenly turned into a ghost story."

"Well, yes… An old-fashioned one."

I opened the gate and walked inside. Maybe it was trespassing since someone surely owned the land, but unless I stepped in, the story couldn't unfold. Entering the premises felt a bit like treading into my own mind without taking off my shoes, but that was just another feeling I had to ignore.

I had to if I were to face it.

If I were to face my past□

“Heh,” chuckled Ogi. “People must live facing the future, but every now and then, the past catches up to you□I guess? At least in this case. Humans live their lives having forgotten pretty big things. That goes for me too□but when something suddenly triggers our memories, we act surprised. Let’s hope all that comes out of this ghost story is a jump scare. Heheheh…”

Ogi briskly skipped along the stepping-stones behind me, and we arrived at the entrance. A rusted sign, which hadn’t been visible from the front gate, hung on its handle.

For Sale.

Underneath were the name and contact info for a management agency, but the rust made it illegible□I couldn’t even be sure the company still existed.

“This sign wasn’t here when I was visiting this place. It must be under new management compared to five years ago□”

It might even have changed hands more than once. That’s just how long a period five years is□and while the place looked like the same haunted house to my memory-tinted eyes, I had to admit it was a building, not some sort of immortal vampire. It had to change.

It was only a “haunted house” because that’s what I felt like calling it.

In fact, it was just a derelict house.

“Heh. Yes, you’re right. Still, I wouldn’t want to come by here at night. Let’s go home before it gets dark.”

“Yeah, I know□I’m not going to make you hang around with me for that long.”

I looked at my watch. It was before five in the afternoon.

At this time of the year, evening turned to night before you knew it. If we really were to go home before it got dark, I basically had no time to waste.

I put my hand on the handle. Surprisingly—or maybe naturally, the door was locked. It resisted me.

The place did have a new proprietor, then—no one ever locked the front door back when I used to visit.

The door would just open for me.

Welcomingly.

“Well, we could force it open…but why don’t we try one of the windows? I’m sure we can find one to enter through, they’ve been sitting here for the breaking all this time.”

As I made this lukewarm proposal, Ogi was already getting to it, but she must have only heard the first half. The entrance was weather-beaten, but it still was an entrance, and it was against it that my junior slammed her body.

Seriously?

Dealing with a stubborn door by charging into it (with a shoulder tackle?) was something I’d only ever seen in crime dramas—just how obsessed with mysteries was this girl?

In any case, whether you’ve been locked in a room or are going after a holed-up criminal, trying to force a closed door by slamming into it is inefficient. The area of impact is too large, and the momentum spreads out. It’s more logical to focus on a specific point, kicking down the door at the area around its lock—when the riot police charges into a closed space, they use a ram as if they’re going to sound a temple bell, to smash their way in. We needed none of this reasoning, though. The entrance had exceeded its lifespan, and a solid slam from the slender body of a high school freshman brought it down easily.

“Okay,” Ogi said, “let’s hurry up and go inside. The neighbors might call the police after hearing that noise.”

She hastily entered the building, her already-swift actions accelerating further, and I could barely keep up. This should've been a journey through my memories, but all of a sudden it felt like she'd taken the reins—or had she held them from the beginning?

"If the police show up, I'll say that we got lost, so make sure our stories are straight," she advised.

"Why do you seem so used to doing this?" I asked with some disbelief, but maybe she actually was. I didn't imagine she was some sort of abandoned-building aficionado, given her earlier antipathy, but she must regularly perform various kinds of fieldwork just like her uncle. I suppose she gets questioned by the police or reported to the authorities by neighbors? When we were entering Public Middle School #701, she was on high alert, too.

Being concerned about the police made her a very delinquent young woman despite her spick-and-span image, but I wasn't too different. We were both on the watch for the authorities as we went about our lives, so I couldn't scold her as her senior. How many faces would I need to do that? Two wouldn't cut it.

"Don't worry, I'll give them the same story. Getting lost is embarrassing as a high schooler, but better than getting my whole life derailed."

"Getting your life derailed? What's that supposed to mean?" my partner found fault with my words. "Sure, they might get mad at you, but it's not like your whole life is going to get derailed just because you were questioned by the police. For the most part, those kinds of people are on the side of us upstanding citizens. Just how much of a coward are you?"

"Well, you know. In my case, both of my parents are police officers, so—"

"Your parents are police officers!" Ogi reacted dramatically.

Hm?

Why did I say that?

Both parents in the Araragi household, both father and mother, being police officers was one of my most private facts, and I told as few people as possible—some of my most highly classified pieces of information, withheld from Hanekawa and even Senjogahara. Why leak it to a transfer student I met for the first time just yesterday?

It was hard to believe. I could only chalk it up to letting my guard down.

Yes, my guard had come down visiting this nostalgic spot, what else could it be—but no amount of regret could take back the words that had come out of my mouth. Both of my parents are police officers was powerful bait to a mystery buff like Ogi, and she was acting like a fish on a line I never meant to cast.

“Why didn’t you tell me? How awful, how could you keep something like that from me, how amazing!”

“Well, it’s not something you’d come out and tell someone you’ve just met—”

“What greater tradition is there in mysteries than having a police officer as a close relative? My goodness, I always knew you were a senior deserving of respect, but I never thought you were royalty!”

“…I guess there are a lot of mysteries like that.”

It did seem more like a TV or film setup to me than a mystery novel motif—but now that she mentioned it, a Japanese detective fiction lion, Mitsuhiko Asami, fit the bill.

“In that case, no need to worry. If someone did report us and the police biked over here, your parents could just bail us out. Can’t you hear the officer interrogating us saying it already? ‘Oh! I never imagined that you were Commissioner Araragi’s son!’”

“Neither of my parents are that high up. And anyway, they aren’t the type to bail out their son if he got himself in a fix,” I retorted in a pained voice.

No, more in pain generally.

As much as I didn't want to discuss my parents, it was going to be difficult to change the subject and cut this short without any sort of explanation, given how deeply Ogi had her teeth in it.

She really was good at drawing things out of you. I didn't think I was particularly loose-lipped…

"If anything, they're the kind of strict parents who'd never forgive their kids for breaking rules. They disciplined me as a kid by taking me to the nearest police box any time I did something bad."

"A police box? Now that's scary—I could even see that traumatizing you."

Well.

It probably did.

Quite the trauma.

But it, too, was part of the past that created the present-day me—I consist of many things. I'm built of many things. The issue is the degree to which I'm aware of it—whether I remember it or not.

I hate people who don't know what they're made up of—Oikura had told me. Now that I remembered this dilapidated house, I had to admit, I saw what she was trying to say.

This place.

That girl. That I lived having forgotten them—did mean I didn't know what I'm made up of.

I hadn't remembered, after all.

"They haven't done it to me in a while, but I can't even imagine what kind of discipline would be awaiting me at home if I got taken into custody. All that time off would only make it worse."

Maybe I wouldn't have had to worry about it six months earlier, when my parents had half-abandoned my high-school-washout self, but now I was starting to see signs of reconciliation as far as that

part of our relationship. I wouldn't want to let it go to waste, even if I was still waist-deep in teen rebellion.

"So, Ogi. I'm going to be as scared of the police as I can. If the worst does happen, I'm sorry, but I want you to play the role of a delicate little high school girl."

"Haha. Well, it's not like I have to play a role, I really am a delicate little high school girl. Don't worry, I won't testify, even by mistake, that you forced me to come into this abandoned home."

"How would you even make that big of a mistake?"

Forget about custody, they'd arrest me for that.

I'd have committed a huge mistake.

Anyway, we went straight into the derelict house via the broken (by us) front door□I think this goes without saying, but we kept our shoes on. While manners would have us taking them off, it's not as though an abandoned home had slippers for visitors.

The floor was of course not in a state where Ogi, the germophobe, could walk on it, and stepping on any of the scattered glass or odd scraps of wood and metal could cause injury or worse. Tetanus isn't as far-removed a disease from our lives as you might think.

"Speaking of tetanus," Ogi began to ask, walking at a rather leisurely pace down the hall compared to her entry.

Her slower speed was due to the lack of electricity (even if the building did have it, every one of its light bulbs was broken) and the dark interior, as well as our fieldworker inspecting the area around her as she walked. For my part, nostalgia had me looking around, so I didn't feel that she was going particularly slow.

"Is the back of your hand that Miss Oikura stabbed okay?"

"Hm? What, are you worried about me?"

"Of course I am. How could I, Ogi Oshino, your faithful junior, not be worried about her esteemed senior Araragi? Please be careful,

that body doesn't belong to you alone," she said, not making any sense.

Yet another form of teasing—Oshino's jokes were similar, now that I thought about it. I didn't get their brand of humor. Just how disconnected were they from the rest of the world?

"No worries, as you know, I have a vampire's constitution. It's already healed up without a scar. Fortunately, in the ensuing commotion…"

The commotion that was two girls passing out.

"I was able to fudge whether or not I'd really gotten stabbed with a pen. Senjogahara's arrival was a blessing, if you look at it that way."

"Or you're that weak of a presence in class—weak to the point that you can vanish without anyone figuring anything out. I guess you're not that different from two years ago in that sense?"

Ogi snickered. Maybe she really was making fun of me.

Pondering this, I continued.

"Oikura ended up spending the whole day in the nurse's room. Too bad—just when she'd finally made it to school."

As for Senjogahara, she left early. She would have been taken to the nurse's room as well, but when the teacher wasn't looking, she made herself scarce—what was she, a master thief or something?

"Haha. I see, I see. I can only imagine how hard that must have been on Miss Hanekawa."

"You said it—and I went off on this journey through my memories to try to lessen any part of that load, but…well, at least it seems like it won't be in vain. Not that this will leave me feeling great…"

"I wonder. If there's one thing I could say—" Ogi turned to face me. "The theory that Miss Oikura holds a grudge against you because of what happened at the class council two years ago—probably doesn't

hold up.”

“Hm?”

“The chances that she mistakenly believes that you brought about her downfall, or are the culprit who leaked the test answers, are strikingly low. Why, you ask?” said Ogi, amused.

Well, I didn’t ask.

While she hadn’t enjoyed the Monty Hall problem all too much, she must have a fundamental love for mysteries and solving them, whether it was this or our earlier time in the classroom. Maybe even her germophobia was the inverse of a personality that loved to take messy situations and give them order. Though you could just call her a mystery nerd… Anyway, her assertion made me want to hear why the chances were low—whether or not I was asking.

“It’s simple. Because she came to school.”

“What do you mean by that?”

It was odd, now that she mentioned it.

A mystery.

Oikura had refused to come to school for two years after the majority vote, so why appear out of nowhere today—with zero warning signs. It was almost as if Ogi and I picking up where that meeting left off and pinning down the culprit, locked in that classroom, had triggered it. But it was a pretty big stretch to claim the two were related. Things happening in a specific order didn’t imply causation—it made even less sense than a butterfly flapping its wings and causing a tornado.

“What I mean by that—well, Miss Hanekawa said it from the start. Tetsujo-sensei went on maternity leave, and Miss Oikura came to school as if to replace her—”

“…”

Hanekawa did say that.

Right.

I'd completely forgotten thanks to the commotion that followed…

"In other words," explained Ogi, "Miss Oikura could come to school because Tetsujo-sensei is no longer at Naoetsu High."

"…Which means, she knows who the culprit was."

She knew—or rather, figured it out.

During the majority vote.

When Tetsujo raised her hand after the class was asked who thought Oikura had done it—or maybe she only realized during the two years she spent "shut in at home," as she put it. I didn't know, but essentially, she figured out that her homeroom teacher had framed her.

"…"

Not as if it improved Oikura's situation—if anything, it must have been the reason why she couldn't come to school. If it was me, I doubt I could ever return even if Tetsujo was gone.

In that sense, she was tough mentally.

"Tough? I don't know, it looks to me like she's bullying herself and enjoying it."

"Bullying herself…"

"She's so weak. A heavyweight weakling, even. She tries to put herself in bad situations, intentionally driving herself into corners—and isn't there only one thing she could want from that? You might even call it a roundabout suicide. No matter how awful things get, maybe they aren't ruinous enough for her," Ogi said nastily.

I guess she could be this biting about Oikura because they'd never met, but then again, this was Ogi. She might say the exact same thing to Oikura's face.

Even in the face of someone so weak, who'd crumble at a touch, she might refuse to ease up.

Saying, Fool.

"In any case, what we do know is that Miss Oikura has never given voice to her grudges or hatred for you in relation to the class council."

"Never given voice to her hatred…"

What was she doing making it sound so romantic?

But true—even if the class council transformed her personality and temperament, it wasn't her immediate reason for hating me.

That's what Ogi meant.

Because as far as that went, Oikura hated me from the day we met in Year 1 Class 3.

She hated me—like you'd hate a homewrecker.

"She hates water that thinks it made itself boil, was it? She says the most interesting things. In other words, Miss Oikura simply couldn't stand the way you live not knowing, even forgetting your roots. But when you really dig into it, that seems odd too. Plenty of people forget about the past. Like I was saying—I've lost most of my elementary-school self to oblivion, to the point that I wonder if I was born just recently and don't have any past at all."

"Born just recently… What, like the five-minute hypothesis?"

"So then why does Miss Oikura hate only you like you're some sort of homewrecker? How strange, how unusual, how suspicious—how frightening."

"Frightening?"

"Yes—due to the difference," Ogi said, enjoying every moment of this. She couldn't actually be frightened, but indeed, people who hate you and attack you for no good reason are the scariest thing in

the world.

If you don't understand their goal, you can't deal with them—in order to fight, you must first know what your opponent considers just. What Sodachi Oikura thought was right, what she believed was right—this trip was in part to figure that out.

"Hahaha. I see, well said, Araragi-senpai. But be careful. While you can't fight without understanding what your opponent considers just, you'll be unable to fight if you start believing that justice is on their side. If you think they're no less right, or righter than you, it's too late—how do you fight then?"

"…"

"Speechless? Are you thinking you'd be fine even if that happened? Or have you already understood what Miss Oikura considers just—and lost the will to fight?"

I wouldn't say that.

I understood something—a mistake that Koyomi Araragi made that might be the flip side of Oikura's righteousness.

My own mistake.

I couldn't be certain yet—couldn't claim to have remembered it all, or to have a perfect understanding of what she was trying to say. I'd have to reach the deepest part of this derelict house to grasp that.

That's where it was—my truth.

It had to be.

The prologue and epilogue that needed to be told, of my tale.

Certainly not a monologue, but a dialogue—with her.

"We should've brought a flashlight," Ogi griped in response to my silence as she began walking again. "I'd have brought my set of fieldwork tools if I had the time. Since we came straight from school, all I have are my cosmetics."

“Isn’t it against the rules to have cosmetics with you?”

“Well, I’ve only just transferred. I don’t know the rules yet, you see.”

Ogi’s plan, as she spouted her convenient logic, must have been to keep on searching, but there was no need. Climbing the stairs and looking at a certain room on the second floor would suffice.

When I made my way up the perilous stairs, which threatened to collapse underfoot, and entered the room

I was already certain.

“Yikes, this one looks just as terrible on the inside. I know you called this building a haunted house, but that’s literally what this place is,” Ogi dispraised, holding a handkerchief to her mouth. Maybe it was too dusty she seemed truly revolted. “But dilapidated as it is, you can see signs of repair: rubber tape on the broken windows, putty on the cracks in the wall. The management’s earning their keep or maybe there was a time when they did?”

“Beats me. Even if someone did some work on this place, it was management that existed before I started showing up here the windows already looked like this by the time I came by.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. In that sense, this place is exactly like it was five years ago. Unchanged. As if time has stopped.”

Like the classroom we’d wandered into the day before.

Actually, no. The dust and stagnant air that Ogi hated so much spoke to the passage of time. It wasn’t as if time had really stopped like with that supernatural phenomenon.

But coming here instantly transported my heart and mind back by five years.

It felt more like traveling through time than actual time travel did.

“See the low, small table over there? We used it.”

“You used it? How? As a chair?”

“No…”

“I don’t really get this to begin with.”

Even if the low table was a chair, Ogi didn’t want to use any that who-knows-who had sat in. She’d never perch on a table covered in splinters and a thin layer of grime. If she moved stuff around with her feet, she could make a place on the floor to sit like I used to, but even I thought it might be unsanitary with so much dust.

Would it not have bothered me five years ago?

Kids can be fearless that way.

“Why keep coming back to these ruins every day for an entire summer? Your behavior just doesn’t make sense—were you an adventure-loving grade schooler, or what?”

“Says the fieldwork-loving high schooler. Of course it doesn’t make sense, kids never do. I don’t know why. My mindset then was nothing like it is now.”

That might go for everyone. This wasn’t just a difference between children and adults, but between the past and the future.

When I look back on this a dozen years later, eighteen-year-old Koyomi Araragi’s behavior would surely seem mysterious—I’d tilt my head and wonder, why talk about myself in a derelict building to a transfer student I’d only just met?

Okay, I was already wondering.

A real-time mystery.

Seriously, why did my tongue get so loose around her? When she asked, I even answered questions I could cover up with a throwaway lie.

By the time I noticed, I'd given my answer.

Ogi was a good listener, but maybe she was a good interviewer too? Oshino had been an expert talker despite how frivolous he seemed—and I guess his niece took after him. Interviews and hearings must be an important part of fieldwork, after all.

In any case, I began to tell her.

About what happened five years ago.

About who I met—and what we did together.

About the stuff that Koyomi Araragi—was made up of.

I told her.

I told my tale.

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Five years ago.

In other words, the kind of person Koyomi Araragi was in his first year of middle school—to be honest, I'm not certain, but I doubt he was as twisted as I am now. A straightforward, pure, earnest, so-called regular kid.

The kind of regular kid you can find anywhere.

Liar, you might be saying, but really, that's how most children are before they hit their rebellious phase, before their voice changes—and I was no exception. I did of course think I was special, because who doesn't think that about themselves, but in hindsight, yes—I was a plain kid, the kind you can find anywhere. The common child, distributed far and wide across Japan.

Although young, banal Araragi never imagined he'd be attacked by a vampire and gain immortality, if he were to pick out something special about himself, both of his parents were police officers—who made peace, justice, and safety their principles. And it was under their influence that his personality developed.

That he was reared.

Inevitably—or because his parents' methods were successful up to that point—young Araragi had a relatively strong sense of right and wrong.

Yes.

As much as I hate to admit it, I was a righteous middle schooler on par with my lovable little sisters who profess to be defenders of justice—though I never had their kind of perilous drive, nor a violent streak (Karen) or a strategic mind (Tsukihi). Furthermore, while they operate as a unit, I acted on my own. To compare us to

superheroes, they were a team of transforming rangers, while I was like Kamen Rider.

I'd love the Fire Sisters a little more if they were at least Pretty Cures—love them more than I should, but in any case, my dispute with the Fire Sisters' activities in the name of justice, the reason I can't help but take a negative view, has at least a little to do with the fact that they remind me of my old self.

A case of like repelling like—of blood making you sicker than water.

A stew of love and hate.

No, maybe it's simple jealousy—that they still believe in the kind of righteousness and justice that vanished in me as a high school freshman.

Those two are able to believe that there are things in this world that are right, and just, regardless of perspective, no matter how many people try to say otherwise—still straightforward, pure, and earnest.

Unlike me.

Very unlike me.

I'm sure they'll run into the same wall someday, and when they do, I need to absorb as much of the shock as possible, as their older brother, as their forebear and forerunner, but that was yet to be—I need to be talking about the past now.

About five years ago.

Back when his parents were still raising their son successfully, young Koyomi Araragi became a middle school student without incident, diligently applying himself to academic pursuits. Yet one day, around the time that first term was coming to an end, he found himself a little fretful. Maybe not a little, but quite fretful—the final exam he'd just gotten back indicated less than satisfactory results.

They weren't downright tragic, but he could see what it foreshadowed—understood better than anyone else.

He was in trouble if this continued.

He was in the danger zone.

In other words, as he rose from elementary to middle school, so did the level of his courses, and he was starting to have trouble keeping up. Still, midterms had been like an extension of his elementary classes.

Once finals rolled around, however, it was as if his courses had finished warming up and started to get serious—especially math.

As the name changed from “Arithmetic” to “Mathematics,” the difficulty spiked an incredible degree, and it now stood in young Araragi’s way.

Today, after having tasted much more of what life has to offer, both the sweet and the bitter, I might brush it off, switch gears, and decide to work harder next term and not take it as some dire omen. But this was five years ago, before my personality was twisted—you could say we’re talking about a Koyomi Araragi back when he lacked flexibility.

He was in trouble if this continued, he thought—he wouldn’t be able to stick to what’s right. While not so cornered as to use those precise words, the idea that he wouldn’t be able to accomplish the righteous act that is learning was more embarrassing to him than any score.

I know I just used the phrase back when his parents were still raising their son successfully, but you could say their methods had failed at this point—doggedly emphasizing what’s right might produce a child that does no wrong, but he also can’t excuse failure. When he fails, he blames himself more than necessary and has trouble getting back up—that’s the kind of child you end up with. And in fact, that’s what happened to me during my first year of high school, and here we are.

Not that I resent my parents, how could I? Yes, there are still some negative feelings between us, and they’re still very worried, but at least they support me now that I’ve gotten back on my feet thanks

to Hanekawa and Senjogahara. As far as how they chose to raise their children, they seem to have learned from their mistakes and made course corrections for my two little sisters, so why say anything now?

But—how did my righteousness-revering heart not break until July fifteenth of my first year in high school? How did my poor score not shatter it to pieces during my first year of middle school? It was because my shoe locker contained three envelopes as I left school.

a, b, c.

Like that.

Three envelopes marked with handwritten alphabetic letters.

Please don't condemn him for this, but young Araragi thought they were love letters at first. He thought his box contained three love letters. Look at that, he thought, the girls love me—such is the mind of a first-year middle schooler.

Despite the presence of the first three letters of the alphabet, it was enough to make him forget about his poor score for a moment. But then he noticed that the three markings and the "To Araragi" had the same handwriting, belonging to one person. He tilted his head.

Why would anyone leave three letters in his shoebox? There was no logical reason, which is to say, this situation was far from right, and he was confused.

His confusion only lasted until he opened envelope a—after reading the note found therein, he saw that it was some sort of quiz.

I didn't know about the Monty Hall problem then, but when it was thrust upon me, it piqued my interest. My interest, or maybe my curiosity—after thinking it over a bit, I opened envelope c.

I hadn't changed my selection from a to c after calculating the probabilities and determining that it was the optimal choice—young Araragi was no genius. I just had the vague notion that if someone gave me this problem, changing my answer seemed like the right thing to do. I opened envelope c as if I were following the

questioner's intent.

The quiz could betray that authorial intent, as the real Monty Hall problem did—and my reasoning may not have been praiseworthy, but ultimately, I made the right choice. You could also say it didn't matter either way. Unable to keep myself from opening both envelopes in the end, I'd have headed to the location indicated on the map in envelope c no matter what.

Why obey the instructions in a letter from an unknown sender and take a detour on my way home from school? I have no logical explanation for my unsafe decision—thinking about it now, I probably should have ignored such a bizarre piece of correspondence.

But I.

Koyomi Araragi wanted to know.

It was curiosity.

He was curious about the curious.

He had a love for it.

It's not as if he knew the intent behind the quiz or what the missive meant, yet—that was the exact reason he wanted to know.

The intent, the meaning.

His youthful intellectual curiosity led him to an abandoned home in a residential development—a new area for him, so young Araragi had no idea such ruins were hidden within.

Its appearance frightened him, of course.

He wanted to leave at once—the ruins were irrationally scary. No sign reading "No Trespassing" hung there, but he still thought it was a place he shouldn't enter. An abandoned building wouldn't scare me these days, now that I've gotten used to that former cram school, but this was a first-year middle schooler—young Araragi didn't have the mental fortitude to endure such a solo test of

courage.

As a boy who revered righteousness and believed in justice, he hated evil and wouldn't hesitate to battle it (I now blush to recall). At the same time, he didn't have the strength of heart to face his fear or this darkness.

The boy who claimed that right was unconditionally right also found the scary to be unconditionally scary.

The story would end there had he gone home, but that's not what happened□very fortunately for me.

"You came, Araragi."

And.

A lone girl appeared from the ruins.

She appeared.

"If you're here, does that mean you solved the quiz?"

"…"

He was silent because he was stunned. For a sweet young girl to emerge from a crumbling, abandoned building was such a fantastic, even perverted sight that it felt unreal to him□leaving him speechless.

Had he wandered into another dimension, he even wondered.

The girl seemed fragile to the point of transparency□like a ghost.

And that's why.

Koyomi Araragi decided to call the abandoned home□a haunted house.

"The question. I…"

Sure enough.

Forgetting even to keep up any childish appearances, I gave this girl, who seemed to be the letters' sender, an honest answer.

"I didn't solve it. I changed my answer, but I don't know why c was right…"

"I see."

The girl didn't seem disappointed to hear that I'd answered based on a hunch. She only smiled.

She looked so happy as she smiled.

"Then we can start by analyzing the problem. Come in, Araragi."

"What?"

"Let's study. Why don't we get smarter together?"

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“Hah□ahaha,” Ogi laughed, having heard this much. “Comical, in a way. What a silly memory, I’d declare it to be nothing but the product of your delusions if you weren’t the lord and master of Miss Kanbaru, who I’m a big fan of.”

“Listen, call my memories silly if you want. But in exchange, retract the product of Kanbaru’s delusions that you just repeated about me being her lord and master,” I interrupted my story to respond to Ogi. “She and I have a healthy, wholesome junior-senior relationship.”

“Heh, is that so□I’d like my relationship with you to be that way too. Um, what were we talking about again? To summarize, a ghost girl who came creeping and crawling out of this derelict house sent you the letters?”

“No, no, that’s not it at all,” I said, flustered. “I didn’t have anything to do with aberrations until spring break between my second and third years of high school, when I was attacked by a vampire. This was a living, breathing human being, not a ghost□she hadn’t materialized on the spot, she just showed up before me and decided to wait inside.” A failure as a narrator, I’d spoken in a misleading way. “I would’ve figured it out with a closer look. Wait, no, I think I knew on first glance. I mean, she wore MS 701’s uniform, the school we just came from.”

“A school uniform? Oh, but now that you mention it, you did say that a first-year middle schooler sent the letters. Which would mean…that you and this girl were classmates?”

“Yes, it would.”

Yes.

That's what it should mean probably.

"You're saying you made a girl wait for you here in this derelict house? You were one bad boy, even back then. What a ladykiller," Ogi teased me off-hand. I wished she'd put a little more effort into it if she was going to. "Were those envelopes love letters, after all? Was it a sly strategy by this girl to lure you to a remote location and deliver you a glorious confession?"

"Glorious…"

What a bizarre way to put it. I couldn't even tell if she was being facetious.

"It wasn't a love letter. And of course, it wasn't a sly strategy, either. Classmate or not, I was only meeting her for the first time. It's not like we had any kind of interaction before that."

"Hm. There's no law against sending a love letter to someone you haven't interacted with if anything, they tend to get sent to people you don't know all that well. But I suppose it'd be an odd love letter using some sort of math problem to attract someone's interest."

"Yeah. And that wasn't it at all. According to her, she sent letters to multiple other people. I was the only one to show up at the meeting spot."

"The only one brazen enough."

"Brazen? Well, I guess so."

Aloof might've been the better word.

You could say I totally lacked the ability to sense danger.

Not only had I come to a derelict home because a letter had sent me there, I entered it because a strange girl invited me in. It was too risky an act for a child. Unsafe and imprudent, and that's being generous. But it's due to these dangerous acts that I am who I am today.

“At the very least, I’d have started to dislike math if not for that summer—I’d have come to hate it. I doubt I would’ve been able to enter Naoetsu High.”

Which meant never meeting Hanekawa or Senjogahara—there’s no way to know for sure, but I’d probably be a very different person today.

That’s not something I’d want.

“I see, I think I’m starting to get a vague idea. Of what exactly Miss Oikura wanted to say—but I don’t get the full connection yet. I don’t want to jump to conclusions. Let me listen to my foolish senior’s story to the end.”

“Yeah…you should. The real heart of the story comes next.”

“Well, why don’t you just come out and say it? I promise not to think any less of you for it. Even if it was pure intellectual curiosity that got you to waltz up to this derelict house, you entered faithfully because this ghost girl was cute, didn’t you?”

“Could you not vulgarize my precious memories?!”

“Well…” Though I raised my voice, Ogi remained undaunted. She was so above it all. “That’s just how first-year middle school boys are. All you cared about was that this girl was cute. I’m not conceding this point to you. Young Araragi would have shown a little more caution otherwise. If it was a brawny bandit of a man who’d come out, would you have followed him in?”

“A brawny bandit? I’d run away like mad whatever the context is.”

“So, was this ghost girl cute?” pressed Ogi, as if her investigation hinged on this point. How crass… “Most boys wouldn’t stand a chance against a cute girl telling them let’s study and get smarter together—and that’s what happened, right? I can tell you’re trying to make it sound like either a heartwarming or a scary story, but in any case, this girl was sweet. End of story, yes?”

“Fine, I’ll admit that wasn’t completely out of the picture, so please leave it at that,” I surrendered. It felt like my memories had been

sullied but then again, it's not like she could really sully or do much else to a memory I'd forgotten until a few moments ago. "But allow me to insist for the sake of my former self's honor: I was also drawn to what she said about analyzing the problem. The letter was perfectly in tune with my tastes that way. To the point that I could hardly believe that anyone could ignore it."

"Hardly believe, huh? I probably would have ignored it," Ogi said dismissively. "Whatever the case, let's hear the rest of your story. About your fateful summer escapade. About the rest of your secret rendezvous with this mysterious girl."

"…"

Her word choice, escapade, gave me pause, and secret rendezvous bothered me even more. Yes, maybe they described what happened, but I never thought of it in such furtive terms, nor felt ashamed or guilty about any of it.

And that's why.

The right term for my meetings with the girl, which began that day would be study session.

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“And so, your chances of getting it right are higher if you switch from envelope a to envelope c. Twice as high. They call this the Monty Hall problem,” the girl finished explaining, and now it finally made sense. I felt like shouting out loud.

This is fun!

That was my reaction—the first time since elementary school that I felt like studying could be fun. Even if getting good grades was the right thing to do, I wasn’t having any fun. Sure, getting a 90 made me happier than getting an 80, but it just wasn’t the same.

Listening to her explanation, I discovered that studying could be fun—and that seemed far more valuable than anything else I’d been learning. This of course had to be in part because of how skilled the girl was at teaching.

Conveying a problem whose solution is at odds with our intuition, like the Monty Hall puzzle, is difficult—take how I tried and failed with Ogi, for instance.

“This is fun!” I had exclaimed. Out loud.

Yes, this was before I grew bitter, before I gave up, before I washed out, back when I was straightforward. I was more affable than I am now, but not the type to be so honest about his feelings with a stranger.

I must have found it just that fun.

It was shocking.

It’s okay for studying to be fun—the idea had never occurred to me. I would have found it immoral, somehow criminal.

If you asked police officers devoted to justice—one of my parents, or someone else, it doesn't matter—why they carried out their duties, they'd get bashed for replying, Because it's fun. If a politician whose actions affect a nation said politics is fun, the remark could even be used to force a resignation.

Likewise.

You should never say that studying is fun—I thought it was forbidden.

But in fact.

The girl's explanation was fun—so much so that I wanted to scream.

It was like the first time I ever read a novel. I'd vaguely seen comics as fun and novels as serious, and having my ignorance shattered was refreshing.

Of course, the Monty Hall problem wouldn't show up in a middle-school math class, so it wasn't directly connected to my coursework. That didn't matter, though.

Before I knew it, I was asking her, "Are there any more problems like that?!"

"Yup. Lots of them," she replied with a smile. "I can teach you as many as you want. As long as you promise to love math even more. As long as you keep loving math."

I was happy.

Her words made me happy—to be clear, young Araragi was close to hating math after receiving those miserable results on his final exam. He nearly hated this new subject, nothing like the arithmetic he so excelled at in elementary school—but that was all wiped clean from his mind. He even felt as though he'd loved math since he was born, ceaselessly.

It was a bit extreme, even for a child's thoughts.

I'll admit that myself.

I might have chewed out any guy who flip-flopped like that, whether or not he tried to hide it. Meanwhile, the girl didn't look bothered in the least when I swore to unconditionally love math.

"Okay, then," she said. "Starting tomorrow, let's keep on studying here together."

I could keep on loving math.

To jump to the end of this story, I upheld my vow. Even after my grades plunged to a washout's at Naoetsu High, I maintained at least a certain standard in math.

But I'd forgotten my all-important vow until just now.

I'd forgotten the cause, producing only effect.

What to make of that?

"It's getting late, Araragi, so I'll just give you some homework. Think about it on your own, come up with an answer, and return here on your way home from school tomorrow."

"Huh? Oh, okay."

My faint disappointment that today was coming to an end was overshadowed by excitement: there was not only a tomorrow, there would be many tomorrows.

"It's a promise. Promise you'll come. That you won't get bored of math."

"Yeah. I get it."

"Then here's your question," the girl said, pulling five cards out of her pocket. It seemed she had prepared this "homework" for young Araragi in advance.

There seemed to be numbers, symbols, letters, and kanji characters on both sides of the cards. Without showing them to young Araragi, the girl lined them up on the floor of the derelict house.

“There are five cards here. What is the minimum number of cards you have to flip in order to prove that a number is always on the opposite side of a card showing a character?”

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“Ah…I’ve heard that question before. But what was the answer, I’ve forgotten.” Ogi tilted her head. “I want to say that what’s important here is that a character doesn’t always have to be on the flip side of a card showing a number? It didn’t interest me too much, but did the question shatter your heart into pieces yet again? Did it send a second arrow through your first-year middle-schooler heart?”

“Do you have to put it that way?”

Well, she was right.

If she wanted to call it a second arrow, that’s exactly what it was.

Now that I had my homework, I went home and thought about the problem as promised. The joy I felt when I came up with the answer drove me even further into joyful obsession.

To put it simply.

I’d become a slave to math.

“A slave□hmm. I was expecting a story of a gentle romance from your early days, but I see the ground has shifted. This is starting to sound like a manga ad for a massive test-prep company.”

“If you want to be objective about it, I was basically going to cram school. I kept on coming to these ruins from the end of first term all throughout summer break. I kept on studying with the mysterious girl.”

To be precise, it was more one-way than me studying with her. She taught me□taught me fun math that didn’t have much to do with my coursework.

She was also the one to teach me about the most beautiful formula

in human history, Euler's□and I can still rattle off all of this "math" that, if we're being honest, is useless at school.

I hadn't forgotten anything I learned there.

I'd forgotten just one thing.

The girl who'd taught it to me.

"It didn't feel like studying to me at all. More like coming to play every day… Honestly, this place was our secret base. Or maybe a secret cram school?"

"Cram school… Which reminds me, wasn't the abandoned building where my uncle lived for a while a former cram school?"

"Yeah. It managed to stay afloat until a few years ago, but sounds like pressure from a corporate chain that moved into town gave it financial troubles until it closed down."

"Financial troubles. Then after it went down in flames, the building went up in flames. Tragic."

"…"

Um.

It seemed to me like she'd gone out of her way to play up the tragic aspect…

"The same might befall this place someday if it stays abandoned," noted Ogi. "You do hear about abandoned buildings getting burned down by suspicious fires all the time. Of course, by the looks of it, it might collapse before it goes up in flames. I can't believe you were holding study sessions here almost every day."

"Well, yeah. It does seem strange when I look back on it now…We could've used the public library, or the school library, lots of other options. But she was fixated on this place. She said she'd only study here."

The next day.

Having solved my homework (in my own unique way, though I ended up being right when we compared answers), we met in our room in the derelict house, where she set out that rule. While she was usually kind, if also a bit precarious, that was the one time she made me promise sternly—there were conditions in order for these study sessions to continue.

Three conditions.

One of them being that they'd take place here—in the farthest room of the second floor of this derelict house.

"Three conditions… Hey, now, that wasn't the deal. I mean, didn't she offer just the day before to teach young Araragi to his heart's content if he'd keep on loving math? How unfair. And contradictory. There's no consistency here. The whole narrative's falling apart."

"You really are a nitpicker, aren't you… Sure, looking back on it now, you're right. Not one of the points in your little lecture is wrong. But isn't it a very human thing to add on conditions?"

To repeat, she was a middle school first-year, someone in the same class as me—not any kind of officially licensed cram school instructor, so tacking on extra conditions didn't put her in violation of any code of ethics.

"Is that so. Well, and the other two? That you'd pay her a fee? The way you're paying Miss Senjogahara and Miss Hanekawa every month?"

"Don't spread fake rumors. I'm not paying a monthly fee to Senjogahara or Hanekawa."

"Ah, right—I guess Miss Senjogahara's stance is that she won't seek anything in return. I'm sure Miss Hanekawa is the same way."

"…"

Actually, why did she know this about Senjogahara and Hanekawa when she'd never met them—even supposing she'd heard about them from Oshino or Kanbaru?

“Funny how you’re so insistent that you don’t pay them. It’d be even funnier if you said, I pay them in gratitude.”

“…So the second condition is that we’d keep our study sessions here a secret between us. That we wouldn’t tell anyone. As for the third condition□”

Don’t ask my name.

Don’t try to find out who I am.

Don’t ask me anything□except about math.

“That was it.”

“What was she, the math fairy?” Ogi blurted out her uncensored impression.

Well, I couldn’t blame her□not only had I been captivated by her aura, I’d been enchanted by math and how fun it was. I didn’t see it quite in the same way as Ogi, but when you boiled it down, it did sound like a fairytale.

The girl spoke and acted like someone from a dream world disconnected from ours.

“Did you ask why she was giving you these conditions? Why your secret meetings had to take place in this dilapidated house, or why you couldn’t tell anyone else about your study sessions, or why you shouldn’t look into her true identity? You must have asked?”

To listen to Ogi, no investigator worth her salt would be so amiss, but my unfortunate self, Koyomi Araragi, was no investigator.

“That went against condition three.” Don’t ask me anything. “That’s why I didn’t ask□I accepted the conditions, no ifs, ands, or buts.”

“Studying math and logic puzzles without those? You’re the type who walks straight into scams, I bet.”

“But I can also say that the girl never demanded anything else. Really, not a thing. Just the three conditions, along with what she

said at the beginning. She never wanted anything like a private-tutoring fee or a monthly payment or tuition. I felt bad about her just teaching me and never doing anything in return, so I brought her some snacks one day, but she wouldn't even allow me to offer them to her. 'I'm not doing this□'"

I'm not doing this because I want to be rewarded.

You see.

All I want is for you to love math, Araragi.

There's nothing I want but that.

I'm glad I'm getting to teach you math.

So please.

Don't stop loving math.

"That's what she said."

"You're only making her sound more like the math fairy…or maybe less of a test-prep ad and more of a manga guide to learning math. Oh, or could it be a science-minded mystery full of math-based tricks?"

"This story doesn't pass muster as a science-minded mystery, does it? It's too illogical. The study sessions end up coming to a sudden end one day, too□leaving behind unsolved mysteries."

"They never got solved?"

"If anything, I was only left with more questions. But anyway, I agreed to all the conditions and started coming to these ruins every day."

"Every single day? Literally?"

"Every single day. Literally."

"Huh□how singleminded of you."

Ogi sounded impressed, and in fact, I was surprised by my own actions, describing them out loud like this. While I'm devoted to studying for my entrance exams, I'm still not as fervent about my studies as I was then.

Strictly speaking, of course, our sessions weren't my studies. It was more the kind of trivia a middle schooler loves than it was math—making me a bit like a game-obsessed kid.

Karen and Tsukihi, the Fire Sisters—though they weren't called that at the time, both being in elementary school—even complained that I stopped being as friendly once I started middle school and didn't play with them anymore.

That aspect of our poor sibling relationship was improving lately—but while I'd chalked up its deterioration to a typical shift in attitude between elementary and middle school, now that I considered it, the sudden "unfriendliness" might have been due to the fact that I'd silently gone off somewhere every day that summer.

It seemed likely—which meant that at the time, I was so engrossed in math that I couldn't be bothered with anything else, even my own family.

"Your story starts to take on a new light if you weren't considerate of your own surroundings—if it got so bad that it had a negative effect on your regular life. At the very least, it'd be more of a ghost story than a heartwarming tale. Were you okay?" asked Ogi, a note of concern in her voice.

In other words, the situation, looked at objectively, worried even a girl who tended to find everything amusing.

"Well, of course you were okay. Otherwise you wouldn't be here talking to me now."

"If it kept on going, then who knows—but like I said earlier, these study sessions came to a sudden end one day."

"An end."

"Yes. An abrupt end. On the last day of summer break. I visited this

place like always, but□”

012

Young Araragi visited the derelict house like always, but that day, the girl who never failed to arrive before him—so she could finish preparing for their session—wasn't there.

That day—for the first time.

Young Araragi found this a little odd, of course, but interpreted the situation in an idyllic manner. Well, he thought, given enough meetings, this was bound to happen sooner or later. He sat and waited for the girl.

No doubt, he optimistically believed, the "math" she was teaching him today took a long time to prepare, hence her tardiness. He even grew excited—but no matter how much time passed, no matter how long he waited, she wouldn't come.

Only after the sun had set did young Araragi belatedly begin searching the home—but she was nowhere to be found. She wasn't hiding somewhere to scare him.

He ended up returning to the room—the farthest one on the second floor, and spent the final night of his summer break there. Raised by his parents to accept correctness as one of his principles, he was staying the night away from home without permission for the first time—sadly to no avail.

His unauthorized sleepover left him empty-handed.

Morning came, but she did not come.

Young Araragi needed to go to school, so he had no choice but to leave the derelict house behind—of course, once the start-of-term ceremony ended, he'd stop by his home then return to the ruins, before the day was out. That was his plan, but he had the vague feeling that it would be futile.

Because during his night there, he found an envelope beneath the low table. An envelope, sloppily Scotch-taped to the back side of the low table where young Araragi and the mysterious girl studied. An envelope that resembled the ones that had been deposited in his shoe locker.

No letters were written on the front, nor was it addressed or signed. The same envelope, but blank—and it was empty too.

Just like the b envelope from before.

It was empty—a wrong answer.

He wasn't so wise a boy as to take its meaning, or perhaps it had no meaning at all—but Koyomi Araragi, first-year middle schooler, had a thought.

It's over.

I won't be learning any more math from her here.

Such was his suspicion—and indeed, I was right.

Not only did I revisit the empty home that day, I continued to do so on days after that, just as I'd promised and at the time I'd promised, but she never came to teach me about how fun math could be.

I kept up my visits.

Stubbornly. Persistently.

But at some point, I ceased to.

If any one thing made me stop, it might have been the realization that the girl didn't seem to be one of my classmates.

Based on the third condition, I didn't look into her identity for quite a while after she vanished, but I came to the end of my rope at last and began investigating the other classes.

As someone without any sort of a network, of course, it was a passive investigation that involved sneaking peeks into other

classes—but the girl I'd met for so many hours one summer was neither a classmate nor even an upperclassman.

She wore a MS 701 uniform, she had on a first-year's pin, and those letters had been placed in my shoe locker, so I'd assumed that she was a classmate—but given the fact she wasn't there at school, perhaps she'd been an outsider.

Not just from outside my school.

For all I knew, she'd come from outside this world.

A ghost in a haunted house—I didn't really think that, but it was as if her entire existence had vanished, and young Araragi—yes, it made him quiver.

He was scared.

That, probably, was when she began to scare him.

Thus—he stopped going near the abandoned home.

Thus—he forgot about her.

But—the one thing he didn't forget was the math he learned from her there, and young Araragi's grades began to rally after second term, supported most of all by his math scores.

In other words, his life had reverted to the state it was in before he started visiting the rundown home—nothing had changed in the long run, but one thing was different for certain.

For the most part, young Araragi kept up his steadfast pursuit of the right and just—at times going overboard and facing terrible repercussions for it—but when it came to math and math alone, he pursued fun.

If not for that foundation.

Once that class council meeting shattered his sense of justice—most likely there'd have been nothing left of his heart.

Math could be fun.

Life could be fun.

The world could be fun. It's because she taught him this□that I am who I am today.

I was made up of that summer.

013

“Huh? Wait, but to cut to the chase, that mysterious girl is Miss Oikura, right?”

Ogi’s casual comment summarized so much that she had all but ruined my story. She checked her watch as she spoke—as a girl she might have a curfew, but as a proud mystery fan, you’d think she’d be a little more proper in presenting the solution.

“Hold on, you can’t call it the solution,” she objected. “If anything, I’d call it excessive misdirection if the girl is anyone but Miss Oikura. It’d be labelled unfair. Though it’d be fun in its own way if it turned out to be me. I said not to tell anyone, you broke our promise to keep those study sessions a secret—you know, like the Snow Woman.”

Not that I had any reason to keep upholding the conditions, now that the study sessions had come to a unilateral end, but it did feel a little weird that I’d told her all of this—which meant her remark didn’t sound all that funny to me.

Of course, it goes without saying that the girl wasn’t Ogi.

Her smile looked nothing like the girl’s.

“Well, you wouldn’t tell me when I asked about her looks, so I did think she had to be an established character. You’d be giving it away if you described her outward appearance.”

“I see.” She got to engage in something resembling deduction—still, you’d be hard-pressed to call it mystery-solving.

“Though it’d be so interesting if the girl was Miss Senjogahara.”

“Nope, it wouldn’t be.”

Unfortunately, Senjogahara was busy being a track athlete back then and didn't have the spare time to teach me, a student at another school. All she could say about that summer was how much she ran.

"In that case, Ogi. How do you explain the girl—young Oikura not being at Public Middle School #701 after summer break? How do you prove she wasn't the math fairy?"

"While it'd be pretty tough work proving the nonexistence of fairies, you don't have to use a theory as fantastic as that to explain why she was nowhere to be found at your middle school once second term started. She transferred," Ogi replied briskly.

As a transfer student herself, she didn't find it special or rare.

"And it's because she transferred that no matter how hard you searched, peeking even into the classrooms of your upperclassmen, you couldn't find her. It also explains why she never showed up again for your study sessions. It's far more likely than the possibility that a student from another school had been wearing your school's uniform—though that'd be the case with the Senjogahara theory—or a student from another school sneaking in and dropping letters into random shoe cupboards. But there's one hole in this line of inference, isn't there?"

Ogi put the point on the table herself before I could point it out.

"Miss Oikura and you had already been classmates—the way you've described things until now, you only met her for the first time after entering Naoetsu High."

"…"

"You said she hated you from the day you first met in Year 1 Class 3. Was that some kind of narrative trick, where you meant the first time you met in that classroom, but not the first time in general?" asked Ogi with a grin—but she was still showing quite a lot of consideration to her senior by interpreting it that way.

The truth was different.

Simpler by much, and easy to understand.

You couldn't even begin to call it a trick.

"I only thought it was our first meeting—in other words, I had totally forgotten about young Oikura. Forgotten who I had to thank for being good at math, forgotten how indebted I was to her. And I treated her as a regular classmate."

So of course—she hated me.

Calling me ungrateful here would be generous.

She had to have remembered me—and then my ungrateful self went and snatched a perfect score from under her, making her hate me all the more.

I hate water that thinks it made itself boil.

Yes, indeed.

I was water—terrible, conceited water.

I thought I was somehow good at math—when I wouldn't be the person I am now if I never spent that summer with Oikura.

"She was saying that everything I am today is thanks to math—even the fact I'm dating Senjogahara. But maybe she wanted to say it's thanks to her—"

Thanks. To her.

The empty compliment I'd given her.

I really did have her to thank.

"She likes happy people," Ogi said, "but she hates people who don't know why they're happy—was that it? Oh, and what else, she hates people who don't know what they're made up of? Heh, what profound words now that you've remembered all these things."

"In any case…"

I had a lot to think about, and a lot to reflect on—I felt a lot of regret, but at the same time, part of me felt like it was all in the past.

And it was.

More than two years ago—add three more years.

Memories are nothing but that, memories. Remembering them now wasn't going to change the present—however.

However.

"I need to apologize to Oikura tomorrow. I'm sure that won't make her stop hating and start liking me, and it probably won't make her feel better—but I need to apologize, so I will."

"Oh? You seem a little reluctant."

"Sure," I nodded, "it's not like I don't have some complaints of my own. Even if she had to transfer schools or whatever, she could have at least said something before she left."

How could she not even say goodbye?

It's not like she was Mèmè Oshino.

"How am I supposed to figure anything out from an empty envelope? And if she'd said something when we met again in Year 1 Class 3, I'd have remembered everything on the spot. Telling me now, after all this time…"

Too late.

I couldn't help but feel that way.

While I knew it was cruel to attack Oikura, I found it hard to overlook all of my festering discontent—not when I thought about the high school life we could have enjoyed.

We'd lost out, I couldn't help but feel.

Had I known, I couldn't stop myself from thinking, even that class council meeting might not have ended the way it did.

"Heh. When you met again?" Ogi said with a mischievous grin. "I was the girl from back then, Araragi, it's so nice to see you, oh, did you really forget about me, come on, you're the worst, oh you, talk about coldhearted! But that's just what I l-o-v-e☆ about you! If she said something like that?"

"I've never met any character on that sublime a level in the world of this story…"

"Well, in that case."

And then.

Ogi's expression suddenly turned from cheeky to solemn.

"Maybe you should think about why she didn't say that."

"Huh?"

"And why she left without saying a thing□you need to think about that, too. If you don't and you apologize tomorrow, you might only make the situation worse."

Ogi's tone seemed oddly certain despite her use of the word might.

"If you can't figure it out, then you need to keep thinking. You need to think until you figure out the reason. You need to solve anything that seems ambiguous. Nothing angers a victim more than an empty apology, after all."

"Victim? Come on, Ogi. Give me a break□don't you think that's going a little far? Sure, I committed an unthinkable social faux pas in forgetting about someone who did a lot for me, but I wouldn't say I victimized her□"

"You're right. You didn't do anything wrong, you're just a fool. A hopelessly hopeless fool."

"…?"

Ogi sneered at my confusion.

If that was the sort of smile you bestowed on a fool—perhaps it was far too kind.

“Ogi, what exactly—are you saying you know?”

“I don’t know anything. You’re the one who knows—Araragi-senpai.”

“Me…”

Something I knew?

Something—I was forgetting.

“I think we ought to borrow a page from Miss Oikura’s younger days and treat ourselves to a quiz. Here’s your problem.”

Ogi put up a finger like she was some kind of TV host. No—maybe like she was some famous detective? As a proud mystery fan, she did have that much down.

“Sodachi Oikura hates Koyomi Araragi as if he was a homewrecker. This is because Koyomi Araragi failed to meet Sodachi Oikura’s expectations—and so she transferred schools without saying a word to him. Now, what exactly did Sodachi Oikura hope to get from Koyomi Araragi?”

“What did she—hope to get from me?”

“A hint. It involves your parents’ profession—you have 120 seconds.”

Two minutes, in other words.

Way too short a time.

Then again, I could be given two years, the same amount of time Oikura spent depressed, and still not come up with an answer.

014

“Basically, Miss Oikura wanted something in return for—how would you put it, teaching you how fun or whatever math could be.”

Two minutes later.

Ogi divulged the solution without giving me a single second of extra time—just how antsy was she to go home?

“In return?”

“Yes—of all the things Miss Senjogahara did or said, that bothered Miss Oikura the most, didn’t it? She’s teaching you without seeking anything in return—this irritated the girl who once conducted study sessions with you.”

Enough to make her get physical.

“Don’t tell me you actually believed her. That she’d be happy so long as you loved math and kept loving it forever? It’s something a fairy would say.”

“…”

“What was it, she turned down the snacks you brought her to show your gratitude? But if you read into that, perhaps she wouldn’t accept them because she needed more from you in return than some snacks? Seems like you couldn’t look at yourself objectively once your eyes were opened to how much fun math could be, but from an outside perspective, those envelopes at the beginning were suspicious. They smell like a trap.”

A trap.

Or I guess a baited hook—Ogi continued.

“Sending letters to other students but you being the only one to show up was a lie. A total fib. Actually, she wanted to reel you in and no one else. Doesn’t it seem hard to believe that you were the only one to bite if she sent letters to multiple people?”

“Hard to believe? Okay, maybe it’s conceited to think that I’m special, but it seems possible. In terms of probability.”

“In terms of probability, you are special. Without a doubt.”

“…”

“We’ll talk about how you’re special later, but she targeted you alone precisely because you’re special—if young Oikura wanted to invite more people to her study sessions, she would have kept casting her lines, don’t you think? There should have been ways for her to promote them even after summer break began. Yet no one but you showed up all summer. What does that mean? What does it mean if you two were alone the entire time?”

So that was her line of reasoning.

Refuting it was difficult, I couldn’t deny it—she was probably right. Had Oikura picked her targets and planted letters for all of them, it’d be strange for her plan to have worked only on me. To begin with, it was hard to imagine a large study session getting together at this abandoned home, in this room.

From the very start.

I was to be the only participant.

That’s what she ran.

That’s what the young girl—planned.

“Miss Oikura knew your math grades were falling, so she must’ve played to that and planted letters that would interest you in your shoe box. A math problem for a boy thinking about how he needed to do something about his math score—I’d say that’s a good lure.”

“In that case, what does that say about me for waltzing in here…”

Oikura met me with a smile, but she might have been trying to stifle a laugh—it had all worked on me so perfectly.

“No, no. It didn’t work on you perfectly—turns out making other people act exactly according to plan is hard. Personally, I’d say that while you’re a fool, Miss Oikura is quite the fool herself.”

In short, the real world doesn’t work as neatly as math does, Ogi said. The kind of line a math-hater relishes—I wanted to argue the point as a math-lover, but I had to keep quiet here.

Indeed, I didn’t know.

What Oikura wanted from me in return back then—I didn’t have the first idea what she’d tried to make me do.

Ogi looked at me, satisfied.

Then spoke again.

“But if I had to say which of you was the bigger fool, it would have to be you—because if not for your misunderstanding, I doubt any of this would be happening.”

“My misunderstanding?”

“That said, your future might have turned out differently if not for your misunderstanding. You might not be getting along with Miss Hanekawa and Miss Senjogahara the way you are now—so maybe it was a good outcome for you. In that sense, you had great foresight, so don’t feel down,” Ogi comforted me.

Not that I could tell if she was comforting me or insulting me.

All I knew was that I didn’t have any foresight at all.

“Ogi, there’s no need to console me, just say it. What kind of misunderstanding was there on my part five years ago?”

“Tell me,” she said, as if to deflect my demand—but she wasn’t going to drag this out more than necessary if she really wanted to go home.

In fact, she gave it to me straight.

Mercilessly, in a way.

“You’re quite familiar with the ruins of the cram school in this town where my uncle, Mèmè Oshino, once lived.”

“Hm? Yeah, of course. I told you I even stayed the night there.”

“You also said something else. This abandoned home is just about as rundown as those ruins—right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Don’t you find that strange? Why would a cram school, freshly abandoned as of just a few years ago, look just as rundown as a home that had already fallen into disuse five years ago?”

“Huh?”

Hm?

Well, that’s… Hm?

Was that—strange?

Yes—it was.

The abandoned school and abandoned home shared something in common, which was that they were deteriorating, unoccupied buildings—but it seemed strange that they’d age in such different ways, at such different speeds.

This house had already been abandoned five years ago. It should have deteriorated far worse over the last five years—but it was in a similar state as a building that had been in operation until just a few years ago, which was impossible. A few years, so two or three… at the most, five years, meaning…

The notion that time had stopped here was mere sentiment.

In reality, five years had passed.

Right□the logical conclusion would be…that until a few years ago, the building we found ourselves in wasn't an abandoned home□but what did that mean?

"…"

I put my hand over my mouth. So that I wouldn't make any weird noises.

So that I wouldn't scream in the face of the truth confronting me.

Let's just say.

If, when I visited this place during my first year of middle school, it hadn't been an abandoned home…

"This isn't the place I was visiting five years ago? The abandoned home where I met with Oikura that summer is in a totally different place□"

"No, that's not it. We followed a map to come here, remember? The same map as five years ago."

Then we'd read the map wrong.

And there was no guarantee that the map from five years ago was identical to today's□it seemed a little late to say this, but it was also weird that the letters I received five years ago were there today.

This excuse came to mind, but I didn't give voice to it□because I was the expert witness here. I knew for certain that this was the same house I'd visited five years ago□which meant.

Which meant only one thing.

This wasn't an abandoned home five years ago□and so.

And so.

"That's right," Ogi said.

With less mercy than ever. And with less ado.

“Five years ago□this wasn’t an abandoned home. That’s what you misunderstood□this was Sodachi Oikura’s home.”

015

What I understood the least—as I had wondered time and time again—was how I'd forgotten about coming here every day for a whole summer five years ago. Childhood memories or not, could I really forget a summer that acted as such a major turning point in my life, a piece of it that important?

How?

I could understand forgetting it as a way to protect my psyche if it was some sort of awful, traumatic memory—but it led to me loving math. If anything, it was a positive memory.

A positive experience.

How had I forgotten it until now? Until this very moment?

Because of that, I hadn't noticed that Oikura and I knew each other. I could only see our reunion as a first meeting.

If there was any one clear reason for this memory lapse that made sense to me—

If there was a reason, paradoxically.

It was that the memory hadn't been positive at all—that if I really thought about it, it might in fact become traumatic…

A truth I wanted to forget.

A reality to be shunned.

If that's what existed here…

"The home—Oikura lived in?"

“It used to have a nameplate, right? Not now, but I think you used to be able to find the characters ‘Oikura’ there. On what grounds? Well, you found it curious, too. Why hold a study session in an abandoned home—the answer is that this wasn’t an abandoned home.”

“No, that’s not what I mean—even if this place hadn’t been abandoned five years ago, there’s no guarantee it was Oikura’s home.”

“Then why did she always get here before you? Don’t you find it strange that she never failed to arrive at your meeting place before you, not even once?”

“…”

Was it—strange?

It was, to the point where I wondered why I hadn’t noticed. To the point where you could say that I really had noticed and only pretended I hadn’t—in which case, I’d have nothing to say for myself.

“Miss Oikura was always waiting here because it was her home—of course, you might have been the first to leave school because of how long each of you loitered around your homeroom, but then, most of your study sessions took place during summer break. She came out of this home on the first day because she lived here. And anyway, once we realize this place wasn’t abandoned five years ago, it only makes sense for it to be her home or yours, if you held your study sessions here. This isn’t your address, so we can determine it to be Miss Oikura’s home by process of elimination.”

“The process of elimination again…”

And not the process of eliminating one option out of three—eliminating the one wrong option of two. There was no debating this solution.

It was overwhelmingly—right.

“So Oikura invited me to her house… I guess that does feel more

like a study session than if we met in an abandoned home□but still.”

It surprised me to learn that I’d managed to enter a girl’s room as a mere first-year middle-school boy□but no bittersweet sensation filled me.

After all, back then.

I didn’t think this home□was a home.

Right. I called it a haunted house, and□

“Okay then. I’m sorry to crack the whip just as you’re busy being shocked, but we’re getting to the most important part of my line of reasoning. Five years ago, did you think her home was abandoned? Did you think it was a haunted house?”

“Are you saying I’m misremembering?”

“No, misunderstanding. I’m pretty sure your memories are correct. You’ve given specific testimony, saying that the windows in this room were already as broken as they are now□so you’re not misremembering, you’re misunderstanding.”

“…”

The tape-reinforced windows.

The cracked, putty-filled walls.

The messy rooms and messy hallways.

It wasn’t an abandoned home□but it was wrecked to the point that you’d mistake it for one.

If this led to a conclusion□if there was a conclusion here you’d want to shun.

If it was a home that people lived in at the time.

And it was still that wrecked.

“…There was violence in the family.”

Violence in the family.

Domestic abuse.

I tried to say it plainly, without any emotion.

Like a TV reporter reading off a script.

But I couldn’t hold back the visceral revulsion—I now stood in that kind of a home, and it disgusted me.

And five years ago.

I had been hard at work studying here, at the site of a crime, and nothing could stop me from hating myself for it.

“That’s right.”

Meanwhile, Ogi was impressively unemotional. She grinned, then twirled around to take a look at the ruined room, as if the truth she’d arrived at made her feel nothing at all.

“You’d have to intentionally destroy a residence for it to be in such a disastrous state that you’d mistake it for an abandoned home—shatter the windows, beat the walls, demolish the furniture. Is the broken intercom broken for the same reason?”

A crumbling home.

A wrecked home—a broken home.

Wounded.

A home that could fall apart at any moment.

Now I understood. It wasn’t an abandoned home—but.

A right and proper first-year middle schooler, who was ignorant about the world and could only think of a home as a peaceful, warm, and comforting place, foolishly misunderstood it to be abandoned.

Haunted by ghosts?

What was I talking about? How ridiculous.

This place was as human as it got.

“Oikura…couldn’t have been the one.”

She wouldn’t have invited me to her home if she were perpetrating the violence.

“So her father? Or her mother…”

“Haha. Even my gray matter can’t figure out which of the two it was. But one or the other, no doubt. It takes a whole lot of work to destroy an entire home to this degree all alone, though. It just might have been both of them,” Ogi blithely offered a terrible thought.

The worst part about it was that it sounded completely plausible.

“It seems Miss Oikura was brought up in quite the tragic household environment. I guess we can’t blame you, snugly raised in your peaceful household, for shoving your memories of an entire summer spent here to the furthest corners and darkest depths of your psyche. If there’s any saving grace, it’s that the violence was never aimed at Miss Oikura’s body□or at least any exposed parts of her skin.”

“…”

At least, huh?

That was far too miniscule a saving grace.

“Transferring once second term started also makes sense in that case□her family, on the verge of crumbling, finally did. This is of course groundless speculation, but couldn’t Miss Oikura have changed her name then as well? That’d make the name once found on this home’s front plate uncertain, but…either way, is that why you thought you were meeting her for the first time when you were reunited in Year 1 Class 3 at Naoetsu High? If you’d been in the

same middle school, you should have at least heard her name, interaction or no.”

You still ought to have recognized her face, though, Ogi said, spreading his arms—this seemed to be her idea of a joke.

I wished she wouldn’t weave jokes into her deduction.

Especially in situations like this.

“In any case, we can be sure that the Oikura family would have been at its limits back then—and she wanted to do something about it.”

“Something? Like what?”

“Something. Anything. That’s why she called you here. In other words, that’s what she wanted from you in exchange. Even if I’m wrong, it wasn’t snacks she was after. Creating a new fan of mathematics was her method, not her goal.”

“No, hold on a second. Fixing a family crumbling as a result of violence? That’s asking too much. What did she expect from a middle-school kid? I might’ve been acting in some Fire Sisterish ways back then, but at the end of the day, it was basically just child’s play—”

“You’ve got the order reversed. The Fire Sisters are acting in Koyomish ways—”

“W-Well, fine, that’s true.”

“She never expected that much out of you, of course. If she did, she’d probably just ask you for help instead of going such an indirect route—which is where your parents come in.”

“My parents…”

“They’re police officers, aren’t they?”

Your honorable parents, who showed you what was right. She expected you to report back to them about the state of the Oikuras.

“If you did the police would intervene in her domestic situation. To be honest, I don’t see that solving anything, but it would be a last-ditch plan to save a family on the verge of collapse.”

“…”

Why be so roundabout, just report the situation yourself an outsider might say. If only things were so easy domestic violence is abuse that stays within a family, so those on the outside have to make moves from their outside position.

Still…

“Still, I’d been sworn to secrecy…by Oikura herself. She said I couldn’t tell anyone about our meetings here.”

My sisters and I even stopped getting along as a result.

Why would she say that?

“Yes just like Snow Woman. I think Miss Oikura didn’t want to be the one to accuse her family, no matter what. She would feel guilty about exposing them, or perhaps she feared retribution maybe it was another case of both?”

“So, she wanted me to tell my parents about the state of her family, but of my own accord? That’s what you’re saying her plan was?”

And it was with this plan that she taught me math not that the idea even made me angry. I didn’t have any right to be mad in the first place. Honest to a fault to the point I ruined my relationship with my little sisters I never told anyone about my trips to this abandoned, or rather, Oikura’s home, just as promised.

I didn’t even think it was her home to begin with.

I simply learned math from her, without a care in the world.

I paid her nothing in return and just exploited her.

I took from her.

When she said that no good could possibly come out of someone like me worrying about her, she wasn't acting tough or exaggerating. She meant exactly what she said.

My life is a total mess thanks to you.

She'd said that as well.

It too was exactly right.

Her life was a total mess and I'd walked away.

I'd neglected her.

"That means they must've been somewhere in this house," I said. "Right? They never showed themselves but Oikura's parents were here."

"Well, yes. They probably were. Although they never came out to offer their guest tea and snacks, I guess they weren't so deviant as to be violent toward another family's child."

"…"

But that also meant that I protected Oikura by coming to this home because I was nothing more than a "guest" who'd leave after a few hours. Back to his own home. I didn't want to think about the kind of storm that must have blown through this place after I did.

I didn't want to think about it.

What she must have looked like under her school uniform.

"So I did nothing that Oikura wanted me to do and yet I took just the knowledge that she'd given me and sucked it all up."

Of course she'd hate me for that.

Who wouldn't hold a grudge.

Forget ungrateful, I was a thief.

No wonder she never bothered saying goodbye how did she feel as

she kept teaching me math every day?

Ogi called it indirect, but the route Oikura hit upon after summoning all of her knowledge and bravery turned out to be fruitless. How had she felt about that?

I may have only been the intermediary, but maybe she thought she was the fool for ever relying on me—Ogi was right, though. Compared to her, I was the far bigger fool.

The empty envelope Oikura stuck under the low table was a perfect expression of the kind of guy I was.

Empty. The wrong choice.

An unreliable guy.

“Heheh. Well, I guess that’s about it.” Ogi checked her watch once more—as if she’d been timing herself to see how fast she could solve this mystery. What kind of person speed-ran this? “If my memory serves me correctly, you began this investigation to look into the reason Miss Oikura hated you like you were some kind of homewrecker—and I feel we’ve more or less accomplished that goal now. As such, I do think it’s about time to pack up and go, but if you have any final remarks, please, go ahead.”

Some kind of homewrecker.

In reality, though, that wasn’t it. Oikura wanted me to be a homewrecker—did it get any more ironic than that?

I thought about mentioning this, but final remarks needed to be more comprehensive than that.

“I’ve been feeling very fortunate—I can’t deny that it’s been smooth sailing for me, and I’m happy. I have friends, I have a girlfriend, I have juniors—I’m very, very happy. But,” I said.

“I’ve started to hate my happy self just a little bit.”

Ogi grinned in reply. “Then I’ll love you enough to make up for that. And depending on how you look at it, it’s a good thing you haven’t gone so far as to start hating math.”

“You’re right about that.”

True.

No matter what I might start to hate, even if I’ve lost sight of justice, math is the one thing I’ll always love. You could even call it a kind of curse.

016

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next day, I was roused from bed as usual by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi before trudging my way to school with heavy footsteps. The truth was clear now. The reality of the situation had been exposed. My forgotten memories had been dredged up and I'd learned what they meant, but what I needed to do stayed the same—improve my relationship with Sodachi Oikura.

Our feud two years earlier.

Our missed connection five years ago.

Both misdeeds and mistakes far too late to take back, I couldn't redo any of it—which was exactly why I couldn't fail now. At the very least, I had to be careful to make sure we never had another commotion like yesterday's.

As I passed through the gates of Naoetsu High while thinking this, I saw Tsubasa Hanekawa trudging along with even heavier footsteps as if she alone shouldered all the troubles of this world.

She normally walked with excellent posture, so seeing her hunched over… Well, she was second only to me as far as being concerned about the hostility between Senjogahara and Oikura. We needed to work together as class president and vice president to tackle the situation, I thought, and called out to her from behind.

I then spoke openly to her about what I'd learned over the last couple of days about my relationship with Oikura—confessing all my thickheaded foolishness, which didn't feel great, but I couldn't keep it a secret from Hanekawa now. Not when we found ourselves in this spot.

It did seem wise to wait and see a little longer before telling

Senjogahara about this one…

Either way, I braced myself for the unsparing reaction I deserved, but to my surprise Hanekawa said:

“Ogi Oshino?”

She’d reacted to Ogi’s name.

“Mister Oshino’s niece?”

“Um…yeah. I figured a lot out thanks to her. I guess you could say it runs in the Oshino family, she was quite the detective. I doubt I could have solved yesterday’s mystery or the day before’s without her.”

“…”

Hanekawa seemed to ponder this silently.

More sternly than you’d expect.

“Are you sure that’s who she is?”

“Huh? Yeah. I’m certain, Kanbaru introduced us,” I said, realizing that Kanbaru’s introduction was no guarantee at all of her identity being authentic. Something about her felt unfathomable but now I realized I hadn’t fathomed a thing about her.

I don’t know anything.

You’re the one who knows.

But it seemed like I didn’t know anything, either.

What else did I know?

“Araragi. It pains me to have to say something that would only keep picking at this wound…”

Hanekawa faced me. It was very much like her not to comfort me in a half-hearted manner but even she seemed to balk at the thought of piling on me.

Don’t worry about me, I urged her, say it.

If anything, I didn’t want more causes for regret after coming this far. If Hanekawa noticed something from her point of view, I wanted her to come out and say it.

We entered the school building and began climbing the stairs to our class as we continued our conversation side by side.

“It wouldn’t be strange for her to learn, somehow, that you’d hit a wall with math during your first-year, first-term finals in middle school. And I could see her putting the Monty Hall problem in your shoe locker and playing upon that. But how did Miss Oikura learn the most vital fact in her plan, that your parents are police officers?”

“Huh…”

“Weren’t you doing your best to hide it?”

Right.

Even Hanekawa didn’t know what my parents did until my little sisters told her just the other day. I had a habit of not telling anyone, even when asked, to avoid any extraneous or unnecessary trouble so why?

Why did Oikura know?

How?

“Well, maybe she just happened to find out some way or another,” Hanekawa said, qualifying her query, “but couldn’t there still be something? I don’t know what, but something. Some kind of memory involving you and Miss Oikura that you have to go further back to remember. A door you have to open.”

As far as memories and families were concerned, Tsubasa Hanekawa had more to say than the average person. The words carried a lot of weight when they came from this girl with mismatched wings.

A memory I needed to go further back to remember.

A door I needed to open.

If they existed, they'd be from a time before I was even a middle schooler—around the time Oikura and I were in grade school… What could have possibly happened then?

Could there really be something I was still forgetting—on top of all that?

If there was.

Just how big of a fool was Koyomi Araragi?

Was there no end to my foolishness?

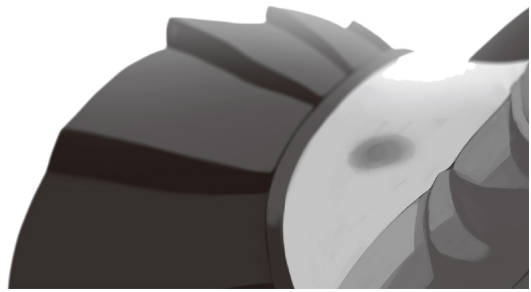
—How could I ever forget you.

Oikura said that to me. Which meant she must remember. About this fool, two years ago, five years ago, and even before that.

I arrived in front of the classroom—whether or not Sodachi Oikura was there on the other side was an impossible proof.

CHAPTER THREE
SODACHI LOST

TSUBASA HANEKA



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So let us now return to the topic of Ogi Oshino—or so I say, but ultimately, she is her and nothing else. Whether we start, repeat, or return to this basic topic, that is the entirety of what can be said about her. Were you to depict the being that is Ogi Oshino in a novel, it would end after a single line. And you know, as someone who tends to ramble on, I have to say I'm very grateful to have a heroine like her.

Ogi Oshino was Ogi Oshino—and they all lived happily ever after.

One line.

And if you were to stretch that idea to an extreme, to as far as it could possibly go, you could summarize anyone in this way—though Ryunosuke Akutagawa is known for saying that life is not worth a single line of Baudelaire, you could sum up any life, whether Baudelaire's or Ryunosuke Akutagawa's, in a single line if you wanted. It's what would end up happening. Were you to fit any life into lines, whether a great man's or an average one's, it'd be a single line long. Saying these kinds of things may get me criticized for being pessimistic or abject—you might say that humans, any human, isn't something so flimsy and frivolous that you could speak about their life using only a single line. Yes, I'd of course like to think that myself—I'd hate for my life to be spoken of in just one line. Were you to speak it, were you to tell it, I'd like it to be at least a book long. An ebook? No good, I need a cover—not just paper, but some kind of front cover. And I'd want a spine that's even stronger. I'd want my spine to tell of me when I'm lined up on a bookshelf. I want to be a book whose spine tells an entire story. So I'd like it if the idea that you can say everything about a person in a single line wasn't true—and that's all I can think about faced with living proof that you can, Ogi Oshino.

Were I to say that—

“No, no, your romantic ideas are absolutely right. Anyone has enough substance to be turned into a full volume,” our perp would likely answer with a grin□her jet-black eyes fixed on me as she pierced me with her words. “Of course, whether anyone would bother reading that book is a different question.”

Are you trying to say that a book that goes unread is worthless?

“What I’m saying□is that you can’t put a price on a book that goes unread. Price and value are two different things. Asking about value is nearly a completely different question from asking about price.”

Hearing this would remind me of the girl who’d been nicknamed How Much□which of the two was she asking about? Price? Or value? Price, something determined by the balance of supply and demand□or value, something fixed. Was it weight, or was it mass? Of course, that might be too cruel of a question to ask her after she learned that value was something determined by majority vote.

“It’s presumptuous to think that someone will read an entire book in today’s society□you’ve got to think of it as its existence being more than enough. While I might be a humanities person who loves to read, unless you can find satisfaction in seeing that your shelves are filled with unread books, you can’t ever be a bookworm.”

But, she said. If you still wanted someone to read you.

“You ought to come up with a one-second summary□you ought to say it in a phrase, you ought to convey any knowledge or tales in a second. If you can’t, who’s going to bother listening to a story like yours?”

No one’s going to read you.

Now it made sense.

All of those novels popping up lately with full sentences for titles and striking sales copy might in fact be based on that reasoning□one line. One phrase. No, it’s ultimately the tale that conveys its meaning in a single word that’s most desired these days□and so.

While we've been studying math for a bit now, let's end with a language arts class—here is your question. There's no need to prepare for it, of course—it's the type of question we all know.

Give a response on something or other in so many words.

While my childish mind didn't understand the reason behind limiting the number of words for these questions you encounter in elementary school, I know why quite well when I think about it now—the ability to briefly summarize is essential when discussing language. If you think about it, the purpose of words, their role, is to convey—and nothing else.

There are of course things that aren't conveyed.

Things that don't get conveyed even after you've run out of words—even if they are, you might still forget them.

As I've already said about Ogi Oshino—were we to center the question around her, it would be, "Discuss Ogi Oshino in three words or fewer," and the answer would be "Ogi Oshino." So here is my final question for you—"How much of a fool is Koyomi Araragi?"

Answer in twenty words or fewer.

However, the words "Ogi Oshino" must appear in your answer.

002

Come to think of it, this may have been my first time since August doing anything with Hanekawa—which of course isn't to say that we'd done nothing at all together for the previous two months or so, we were class president and vice president, but it really had been quite a while since we last did something big together as a two-man cell.

An event.

An incident, you could even say.

Still, it wasn't all fun and games—unfortunately, I wasn't in a state of mind to let me get flustered over working alongside Tsubasa Hanekawa, class president among class presidents, a grand figure whose name will surely be remembered throughout history.

This was because my gait was so extremely heavy that it now seemed fettered by something resembling Saturn's gravity—for you see, our two-man cell's goal, the "something big" we needed to come upon…

My pace as I walked toward it was just as heavy, just as weighty as my mood.

"So—did you figure it out, Araragi?" asked Hanekawa.

Like she'd finally asked a question she'd been waiting for the perfect time to spring.

Classes had finished for the day, we had left Naoetsu High, and we were on our way together—but not on the road back to my home or Hanekawa's.

"Why did Miss Oikura know your parents' profession?"

“Mmh… Uh,” I muttered with a vague nod.

Most people would probably see this as trying to gloss over something you didn’t know—in fact, it was the complete opposite. There are also things that people try to gloss over because they do know, because they understand—but while it had only been an unconscious reaction, what could be more meaningless than lying or glossing over something in the face of Tsubasa Hanekawa?

“I figured it out,” I drooped my head and said. “I checked with Sengoku, so I’m sure of it.”

“Um, why are you hanging your head when you did?”

“My head’s like a fruit, the riper it is, the more it sags.”

“I see… You kind of seem out of it today. You look like someone who visits a friend at a hospital only to show up looking sicker than them. What’s the matter with you?”

“…”

A hospital visit, huh.

Then again, that was the kind of gentle, roundabout rephrasing of reality that I knew Hanekawa for. Were you to give a cold and precise account of the truth, this was more like a home visit—by a class president and vice president. Though we’d never conducted one of these in our half-year since taking office, we had no choice.

I say that because I wasn’t blameless regarding this situation—or rather, the trained eye would have no option but to place the responsibility for it entirely on me. The girl being visited had to place all the blame on me, in particular—and knowing this made my steps heavy.

Like I was on Saturn.

In fact, I’d been feeling so uncomfortably out of place for the last few days that it really felt like I’d been taken to another planet—and told that it was in fact my birthplace, awkwardly enough.

“It’d make anyone want to hang their head. I wasn’t able to remember no matter how hard I tried, but then it came right back to me once I did what you suggested. You really do know everything, Hanekawa.”

“I don’t know everything. I only know what I know,” she answered casually. This much was business as usual, but then she added, “I can’t say I know everything when I don’t know what Ogi knows.”

“…”

Ogi.

Ogi Oshino.

“Are we okay?” asked Hanekawa. “She’s not tailing us, is she?”

“Tailing us… What, do you think she’s an assassin or something?” I replied, half-dumbfounded, but Hanekawa wasn’t kidding, and she stopped to look behind her. She’d waited until we stood at a point with few blind spots—she did live here, but still, this class president had no need for a map app.

“An assassin? Do you mean a detective?”

Had Ogi, a transfer student with little knowledge of the area, been tailing us, it should have been easy to find her by turning around here and straining our eyes—but even Hanekawa couldn’t spot our unseen tail, our unseen detective.

She wasn’t satisfied, though. “Hmm, I would have preferred it if she’d come along with us—in this case, at least. I could’ve given her the slip.”

“Aren’t you acting a little paranoid?”

“No, but think about it. Even if she isn’t tailing us, she might have gone ahead of us. It’s clear where we’re headed, so taking the time to look up the location would be the less risky move—making it the more annoying and harder-to-defend-against scenario. It’s not easy to look up another student’s address these days, but not impossible… I don’t think I’m being paranoid.”

“If you’re not being paranoid, then you’re overestimating Ogi. Yes, she’s Oshino’s niece, so she does seem reasonably smart, but she’s still a child, or you know, a freshman. Charmingly innocent. It’s my duty as her senior to keep her from becoming like Oshino, as well as my way of repaying him.”

“Your way of repaying him… Well, that is a wonderful mindset.”

Hanekawa began walking again.

Her tone had been relatively harsh, considering she’d complimented me.

“How admirable,” she continued. “And here I was thinking that you’d gotten obsessed with yet another cute little underclassman who’d appeared on the scene.”

“What do you mean, yet another…”

“Weren’t you acting in a similar way with Miss Kanbaru? If that really is your mindset, I’d like you to stop giving off the impression that you’re preoccupied with an underclassman just as our class is going through all these problems.”

“I’ll take that to heart.”

“Good.”

I don’t know if you’d call it being serious or being stuffy.

But this part about her never changed.

No, maybe it had.

Either way, Tsubasa Hanekawa was clearly no big fan of Ogi’s□but it was true that our transfer student didn’t have the most approachable personality.

And she was awfully enigmatic.

Even if you conceded all of that, though, you had to admit that she was far more approachable than Oikura was now□

“Just to make sure,” Hanekawa said. “You’d forgotten about your time in middle school with Miss Oikura until you accompanied Ogi on her fieldwork, correct?”

“Hm? Actually, no, it’s the other way around, she accompanied me on my fieldwork. She came along with me for the most part—she just helped me remember Oikura. Yeah, I guess I feel bad about troubling Ogi when I think of it that way. I shouldn’t carelessly get my juniors involved in my personal business. I’ll have to make it up to her later.”

“Hm. Hmmm. You’re not understanding me for some reason. Maybe I’m not putting it the right way?” Hanekawa tilted her head. “From my perspective, she’s as dangerous as they get.”

“Dangerous? Are you talking about Oikura?”

“See? We’re talking past each other. It’s almost like you’re intentionally avoiding my point—but whatever. It probably just means we can’t talk about it yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying there are limits to what a person can do—but that’s exactly why we need to do everything we can. It’s easier to walk along the edges of your limits when you can see them.”

It was a superhuman thing to say—and extremely human at the same time. I say this because the old Hanekawa wouldn’t have thought twice about stepping over those lines.

I think it goes without saying, of course, that her way of trying to get as close as possible to the kinds of lines that most people avoid showed her mental fortitude. Then again, you’re not going to set a goal of taking a post-graduation trip around the world without that kind of inner toughness.

I sincerely respected her.

That made it all the more disappointing to see her in the grips of a line of reasoning so far off the mark.

I might need to talk to her about it before we arrived at our destination. I needed to put aside any personal feelings born out of my adoration of Hanekawa, because I didn't want the situation to get any more complicated.

"Hanekawa. If you think that Ogi feels hostility toward Oikura, you're wrong. The two haven't even met. Though, hearing my story, her eccentricity might've aroused interest□"

"That's not what I'm worried about. No part of me whatsoever is concerned about whether or not Ogi has Miss Oikura in her sights. What I am worried about is□"

"Is?"

"You□Araragi."

Something you don't understand well might have you in its sights□Hanekawa warned.

"Something I don't understand?"

"Or maybe□something unwelcome."

True, you couldn't deny that Ogi was unfathomable□and she certainly had me in her sights.

But what was Hanekawa saying?

What was she saying□and what did she want to say?

What couldn't she say?

"To be honest, I don't know if you can defend against it all."

"Defend against…"

"You call what happened during spring break hell□but your ordeals might have only begun."

My ordeals.

No, no way, Hanekawa was going through far more of an ordeal.

Our ill-fated class president, not me, I thought, when

We'd been busy rambling back and forth, but class president Tsubasa Hanekawa and vice president Koyomi Araragi reached their destination: Sodachi Oikura's current address.

003

After two years of absence stemming from the Year 1 Class 3 meeting held on July fifteenth, former class president Sodachi Oikura had at last, whether because the time was right or in spite of it all, returned to school, only to stop coming again the next day. She didn't come the next day, or the day after that—which is to say she'd gone back to being absent from school. No, she hadn't even been present for classes on that first day, so the records would only show an uninterrupted streak of absence. If you witnessed the incident that occurred early that fateful morning, her resumed absence was the result of her delirious behavior—this in no way precludes casting doubt on the view that it was my fault, but unfortunately, there were also witnesses to the violence wrought by Senjogahara's fist. The quick thinking that led to her collapsing on the spot somehow managed to keep her out of trouble, but it was only a stopgap measure—though of course, Oikura had been the one to strike first.

Just as I'd hoped, no one was sure if she'd stabbed the back of my hand with a ballpoint pen. But if a girl resuming her absence after finally returning to school ever got connected to a grand brawl, it was sure to become an issue.

While free-spirited and uncontrollable students like Kanbaru obscure the fact, Naoetsu High is in general a full-fledged prep school, meaning it is exceptionally strict when it comes to scandals.

In other words, Sodachi Oikura taking off from school again also endangered Hitagi Senjogahara's position to some degree, since the situation now involved her—though of course, we're talking about a clever girl here.

Keenly aware of the disquieting mood at school, she hadn't returned since that day either. Senjogahara took a leave of absence (?) in synch with Oikura. The stated reason was probably anemia, or

perhaps minor fracturing (from hitting Oikura with her fist), but as far as people like Hanekawa and I, with our deep understanding of Senjogahara, were concerned, she was one hundred percent faking it.

She'd lived thinking only about her own self-protection once upon a time—though the old Senjogahara would never confront Oikura and precipitate such a commotion, not even by accident.

Whatever the case, it looked like one of those situations where no one involved in a fight is truly innocent. Senjogahara succeeded in making it hard for outside parties to comment, for which I commend her—but you could also call it reaping what you sow.

Anyway, Oikura had stopped coming to school, and so had Senjogahara. On the second day, class president Tsubasa Hanekawa decided to act.

"Miss Senjogahara could lose her recommendation at this rate," she cautioned me.

"Wait… Why? You mean her college recommendation, right? Due to a violent scandal?"

"Nope, that's not why. She managed to make both sides look guilty—but simply as a matter of attendance. She might not be as bad as you, but she's taking a lot of days off."

"Oh, I guess so…"

Come to think of it, her attendance rate during her first and second years could hardly be worse. It was of course because of her so-called illness, so while she'd returned to living like a regular high school student since May—

"She was sick with the flu or something in August when you weren't around. I'm sure she'd have no trouble at all getting in by way of exams even if her recommendation got rescinded, but a canceled recommendation is a fairly big deal that could have repercussions for our juniors—we need to solve this problem."

We.

That included me.

Already.

“Okay, but how? Do we go to Senjogahara’s, tell her she has to stop pretending to be sick, and drag her out of bed?”

Not that she’d be cooped up, since it was a feigned illness. Judging from the less-than-perfect lies she always told, she could be out shopping.

She really did worry me in so many ways.

“It’s not just Miss Senjogahara—we need to be worried about Miss Oikura, too.”

“Oikura?”

“Yes. Miss Oikura, too—aren’t you worried about her?”

“…”

Hearing a statement that certain made it hard to contradict…but to be honest, I didn’t know if worried summed up everything I felt about Oikura.

Not to say it didn’t affect me to know that she’d gone back to being a “shut-in”—but I didn’t know how to approach her when I thought about the relationship between us that I’d uncovered the other day.

It felt too late to thank her or apologize to her—okay, that was nothing more than a convenient excuse. If I’m being honest, it felt awkward and shameful, and that was the real reason I didn’t want to have to face her.

You often hear people say you ought to live your life looking to the future, not the past.

You can’t change the past, but you can alter the future.

That kind of thing.

Absolutely, yes, it's exactly as they say—but facing the future in order to turn away from the past didn't feel like looking ahead, it felt backwards.

A negative way to be forward-looking.

We ought to live looking both to the future and the past—and I was a man as far removed from that as you could get.

Whether I faced the past or the future, my eyes were shut as I tried to maintain the status quo.

That's who I was.

"Yeah, I guess I'm worried," I ended up saying.

The words must have sounded reluctant.

Or rather, objectionable and offensive.

"But it's like I told you yesterday—I'm at a point where I even think it might be better if I don't bother her right now. It does concern me that she's stopped coming to school again, but I have to admit, some part of me feels relieved."

"Coming out and saying that is fine, you know," Hanekawa approved with forced cheer.

Since both parties involved in the incident weren't coming to school, some of the fallout was starting to come the class president's way—which did make her look exhausted, but here she was, as plucky as ever.

"It's okay to say that. No one's going to hear that and think you're trying to gloss over the situation—and it's not as if keeping up appearances is the only thing that matters."

"I'm glad you think so."

I wasn't thanking her so much as I was being honest with her—Tsubasa Hanekawa was always there to mend my heart whenever it neared its breaking point. In fact, that's how it's been

since spring break.

This whole time.

“Hanekawa, if you have some kind of idea, I’ll help out, of course. Whatever it is you have planned, it did come from your brain. Are you basically plotting to get them to make up?”

“Mmh. Mmmm□making up might be a little too much to ask. Especially out of the blue… They did have a fistfight. The old Miss Senjogahara might have been fine with it, but I don’t know about now.”

“Yeah…not now,” I agreed.

In fact, I started to feel embarrassed about asking a stupid question□this was actually an instance where Senjogahara’s reformation acted as a negative. You might not expect it, but the number of instances was a lot higher than one.

It was at times like these when I felt that the old Hitagi Senjogahara, tense and thinking only of her own self-protection, was really gone. You could say she’d left it up to me to figure out a plan and clean up after her mess, but she was also just staying away from school because something happened there that bothered her.

It wasn’t stubbornness or strategy.

Really, she was being a regular girl.

A high school girl.

But if you were defining her that way, you needed to see Oikura in the same light.

It wouldn’t be fair otherwise.

Given our history, I couldn’t help but be biased and prejudiced and see Oikura’s actions as being exceptional and out of the ordinary. I couldn’t prevent myself from finding some kind of deeper meaning in what she did, but I also needed to step away from our connection□however impossible it was to forget□and look at her as

a fellow classmate.

Which meant I couldn't just neglect her.

"So, Araragi. My plan is to go for a home visit after school today□to visit both Miss Senjogahara and Miss Oikura."

"Hm?" I replied, caught unawares.

It seemed like a natural guess as to where the conversation would go next, or a natural turn even if I didn't guess it. I was more surprised than I needed to be.

I shouldn't have been hm-ing this late in the day.

"If it's Miss Oikura's address you're wondering about, I got it from our homeroom teacher□but this is where we get to what I wanted to discuss," Hanekawa said, intimating that the class president and vice president visiting the two at home to resolve this situation was a predetermined procedure and path open to no discussion whatsoever. "We're so short on time that I thought we could split the work□who would you rather visit? Miss Senjogahara or Miss Oikura?"

"…"

"I'll leave it up to you."

The question was like some kind of psychological game.

But it was no game at all and didn't involve logic□only my psyche.

004

Pay a visit to my girlfriend's home, or pay a visit to my mortal enemy's home.

Quite the extreme choice, but I ended up picking the latter—you might say that I was making a masochistic, self-flagellating decision to corner myself, just like Oikura. And you'd be right, I did let my self-flagellating impulses take over.

Someone like Koyomi Araragi would never face Sodachi Oikura otherwise—and whatever she thought of me, I wouldn't be able to think about myself in any way at all unless I made a change.

I gave myself over to that feeling—Oikura would only find it annoying, and she probably hated that part of me, but regardless of how much hate I attracted, it wasn't as if I could suddenly stop being me.

I am me.

Koyomi Araragi is Koyomi Araragi.

But there was another, no, two other elements here—one being my exact relation to Oikura. As Hanekawa pointed out the day before, why did Oikura know what my parents did? And indeed, following her advice led me to the answer, miraculously solving the mystery. Miraculously, or promptly. And no, I'd only found an answer, I didn't know for sure if I could call it a solution—but in any case, my relation to her during our first year of high school, during our first year of middle school, and now, during elementary school, all sat there in my mind.

I wanted to use that as a base.

And I wanted to talk to her again.

…To be honest, I didn't, and I knew we wouldn't have a proper conversation in more ways than one, but there are times when you just have to leap into a bottomless swamp even if it's illogical or straight-up suicidal.

It had to happen.

The second element, though, was extremely practical, or perhaps pragmatic, which is that if I went to visit Senjogahara, I would without a doubt treat her with kindness—which wouldn't help her. To be fair, she'd helped me, or even taken my place by confronting Oikura for me, so I had no right at all to act stern even if you disregard the fact that we're going out. No, sorry, don't disregard that. Anyway, I had a better relationship with Senjogahara than I did with myself—an ironclad case for letting Hanekawa, who could be open and unsparing with her, handle that situation.

"Yes, you're right, I agree. I thought you'd choose Miss Senjogahara despite all of that—but I guess this is part of who you are," Hanekawa said. "Then let me handle Miss Senjogahara, and you do whatever you can to drag Miss Oikura back to school. It might be impossible to make them friends, or to get them to reconcile…but leaving things as they stand is just going to bring both of them unhappiness."

We needed to get Senjogahara to stop playing hooky so that her college recommendation wouldn't be rescinded—and we couldn't allow Oikura to keep doing this either, not after she'd returned to school, however halfheartedly. The two might come to blows if they met in class again—but taking care to make sure that didn't happen was part of the class president and vice president's job.

Even if we weren't up to it, we had to do all we could.

That might sound snide, considering that Oikura once abandoned her own job as class president—but whatever, the decision was made for me, class vice president, to wait until after school to visit her current place of residence.

Hm?

You want to know why I met up with Hanekawa again, when we were going to act separately? Well, this is how that happened—and I personally see this as one of her ordeals, or rather an illustration of her fretfulness. After the final bell, I got Oikura's address from Hanekawa, who still had some business at school, and started off on my own—but just as I neared the school gates.

"Hmmm? Well, if it isn't Araragi-senpai!"

Ogi Oshino called out to me.

"Oh… Ogi."

I.

I kind of felt like the air had been let out of my balloon just as I was getting ready to take off—nothing in particular had happened, but it was as if I'd finally prepared myself to go off and tackle a very important matter only to have someone offer me a cup of tea and a seat. I doubt you understand what I'm trying to say here, and I don't either. But if someone offers you some tea, you can't leave as soon as you take it.

"Ogi…are you heading home?"

"Home? Um…no?" She clapped her hands. With a smile. "What are you talking about? We agreed to meet here, remember? Our promise was to meet by the school gates at 3:42 p.m. And look at you, right on the dot, you're so punctual. You're so serious when it comes to this kind of thing—you fool."

"Hm??"

I tilted my head.

I couldn't recall making the promise—it was nowhere to be found in my memories. But, well, it had to be true, if Ogi said so. Though the way she called out to me just now didn't make much sense in that case. Not to mention, 3:42 p.m. seemed like too exact of a meeting time.

Uh oh, had I forgotten a promise I'd made to a junior? What an

awful example I was setting. How was I supposed to put on airs now?

“Yaaay, hooray! My senior Araragi is taking me to a sushi restaurant, and not one of those cheap revolving ones either.”

“Did I really promise you that?! Me?!”

“Of course you did. You said it was to celebrate my transferring into this school.”

“A nice sushi meal to celebrate transferring schools… What in the world has transferred here into my school?” I said jokingly, but it was also a very sincere question—what exactly had transferred here into my school?

“And you promised you’d take me out to a bar afterwards.”

“A bar? Like a salad bar?”

One expensive junior had transferred into my school. Even if she meant a salad bar.

But whether or not I’d made such a promise, today was the one day I couldn’t go to a sushi restaurant or a bar—feeling bad, I gave her a sincere apology.

“I’m sorry to say, Ogi, I won’t be able to make good on my promise.”

“Huh, that’s a pretty cool-sounding line. Wow, a cool line as you’re breaking a promise. What, no money?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m a multimillionaire.”

If I was going to break a promise, I might as well lie while I was at it.

As if I was barely sorry—well, maybe I was being a different kind of sorry.

“I have to drop by Oikura’s place.”

“Ohh? Back to that abandoned home, then?”

“No, not the abandoned one. Her current one…”

Mmf.

I was running my mouth again with her—I needed to reel this in, lest I get a reputation as someone with loose lips.

I shut them tight.

Then—Ogi touched my lips with her index finger. She brushed it across them, like she was putting lip gloss on me.

“What’re you doing?!”

I couldn’t keep from reacting to this fetishistic move, but it seemed there was no sexual meaning behind it.

“No, I was just seeing if I could unzip your lips,” she said brazenly, breezily. “Though I’m sure it’s more like velcro—please, tell me more. What happened? Just look at how fast you’ve unlocked her heart, you’re on good enough terms to get yourself invited to Miss Oikura’s home after what happened yesterday—or the day before that, I guess. What leaps and bounds you’ve made, you need to report on how this has all come to be, you fool,” she ended with an order.

Something about the way she spoke was just so unnatural.

“No, we’re not on good terms, and I didn’t unlock her heart or anything. I haven’t been invited, I’m basically forcing my way in. She stopped coming to school again yesterday—though she’d barely showed up the day before that,” I said, having no choice but to explain.

I did have some degree of accountability here, given that I’d broken my promise to celebrate her transfer.

I reported the current dilemma: Tsubasa Hanekawa had decided to act because both Senjogahara’s position and Oikura’s future were in a bad place unless we did something—wait, reported? That makes it

sound like she was my superior…but it feels like the right word to use, so I'll leave it be.

"And that's what happened."

"So that's what happened? Hm… You know, it's going to turn into a fight if you head there by yourself," Ogi said with a thoughtful look after hearing me out. "You're just going to resume the argument you had in the classroom, only in Miss Oikura's home don't you think?"

"Yeah, part of me does… That is a worry."

"You should've handled Miss Senjogahara, while Miss Hanekawa handled Miss Oikura you've been assigned to the wrong post."

"Hmm, well, you might be right."

Her remark did seem on point if the idea was to settle this peacefully but peace in this situation looked awfully like closing our eyes, and I didn't think we could arrive at a solution with our eyes shut.

Hanekawa had the kind of personality that hated work for the sake of work, work in order to create an alibi and in this case, even I, her vice president famous for his slipshod work, felt the same way.

"Hmm but what about her family environment?" asked Ogi. "It seemed pretty dire, didn't it? Charging into that seems more than dangerous, it seems foolish. I can't recommend it."

"Oh, we don't have to worry about that… I haven't heard the details, but it looks like she's living away from her parents."

"Away from her parents? A-ha. So she's been placed under the care of her relatives?"

"No. Living alone, apparently."

"Huh well, how interesting."

Her heart may have been sent racing by a "backstory" you only saw

in manga—a high schooler living by herself.

“Her parents must have gotten divorced or something five years ago, just like you said—or I guess you could say her family fell apart. Then she returned here two years ago. I’m sure that technically—or legally speaking—she has guardians…”

“I see. So the blind guess was the right one. Though that does create its own problem, my foolish senior. In essence, you are about to visit the home of a girl who, for all intents and purposes, is living alone. That’s no good.”

“It isn’t?”

“It isn’t, at all. No gentleman should ever do that. Miss Hanekawa may trust you, but I’m sorry to say that in general, a boy going on his own to visit a girl living by herself will raise doubts. It’s not something he should do if he already has a partner.”

“Hmm.”

Hearing her put it that way…made me think she might be right.

While I didn’t think I needed to be so concerned about how every little social grace and matter of manners between the sexes reflected upon me when I was only in high school, I did want to avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding. It’d be one thing if it was just me, but if those kinds of rumors got started about Oikura, someone who hated me, she might seriously end up committing suicide.

Suicide…

The inauspicious word happened to come to me, and I shivered when I realized just how realistic it sounded—right.

Whether or not Hanekawa was the more appropriate choice for the visit, regardless of how Oikura now lived, no matter what misunderstandings might be created—I needed to approach her in a way that didn’t put her in any worse of a situation.

Not as atonement for failing to give her the help she sought five years ago, and it certainly wouldn’t be enough to make amends for

it□but I was faced with a very real question.

“I see you’re having trouble coming to a decision.”

Ogi shrugged as if to sigh. She seemed quite serious about stopping me from going to Oikura’s home, and I could tell that her advice came from a place of kindness. I felt like I had no choice but to accept it, and she seemed to realize this.

“I was so looking forward to that unrevolving sushi…”

Or maybe it came from a place of hunger, not kindness? Either way, as bad as I felt about having to cancel our plans, my feelings of relief trumped all.

I couldn’t stand around and talk for too long, in any case. I began to wrap things up.

“Anyway, Ogi.”

“Oh, right! I just might have an idea,” she cut off my wrap-up.

Because she just might have an idea.

“Why don’t you bring my humble self with you to the home visit?”

“Wait. You, Ogi? I appreciate the offer, but…”

Hm? Did I appreciate it?

What about her accompanying me made me feel appreciative? Oh, but Ogi’s earlier reasons for me not visiting Oikura’s home only applied if I went alone.

“In other words, you’re fine just as long as you’re not alone. Especially because, you know, I’m a girl. I’m sure Miss Oikura’s heart will be a bit soothed if I’m with you.”

“She’s not really the type to be soothed because she’s dealing with a girl…”

Maybe if she was dealing with a junior?

No, she'd unleashed a slap on Senjogahara who, better or not, Oikura saw as a weakly girl… I couldn't see someone who wasn't kind to the sick being kind to her juniors.

Still, it did beat the two of us being alone—yes, it was a good idea. It even made me wonder why I hadn't come up with it myself.

"I'm a good listener, as you know—Miss Oikura might tell us all kinds of things if I'm there."

"All kinds of things."

"At the end of the day, socializing is information warfare. There's no downside to knowing about your opponent. You've been able to recall who she was after remembering what happened at the class council and during summer break when you were a first-year middle schooler, but you haven't had any sort of proper conversation with the present Miss Oikura. I'll insert myself so that the situation between you two doesn't escalate into an argument. It's too late to get off this ride, just let me handle the burden," Ogi said with a smile, as if her proposal came from a place of pure benevolence.

There seemed to be no reason for me to reject her offer. If I had to come up with one, it would be my hesitance to take a junior to an utter war zone instead of the stationary sushi meal I'd promised… Then again, Ogi also seemed the type to enjoy raw fights over raw fish.

She loved fieldwork, probes, investigations, inquiries—though in reality, she was also nothing more than a rubbernecker.

How could I turn down this wildly curious girl's offer? As long as I was prepared, how could I possibly fail to protect one underclassman even if Oikura ended up going berserk again?

"Okay then, Ogi. Come along with me."

"All right, thanks for asking."

"Don't ask her!"

Hm?

Whose line was that last one? There's no speaker tag attached to it, I thought as I turned to find Hanekawa, apparently finished with whatever business she had, catching up to me as I wasted time standing and talking by the school gates.

005

“You mustn’t ask her, Araragi,” Hanekawa panted. She must have run to the gates from our school building. Had she left like usual, ready to head toward Senjogahara’s home, only to find me and Ogi speaking by the gates and dashed over to us in a panic?

Ogi smiled.

She smiled as she looked at Hanekawa.

“Hanekawa…”

I didn’t understand what was happening, so I tried saying her name for now. Sort of like the way you invoke God’s name when you’re in a bad spot, but true to form, Hanekawa calmed her breathing, looked up, and answered me.

“You know you shouldn’t—you can’t get an underclassman involved with an in-class dispute.”

“Mm?”

Oh.

That’s what she meant? That’s what it was?

I’d wondered what it could be, the way she yelled my name in the kind of desperate tone you’d use to stop a friend from starting down a path of sin, but it turned out that she only wanted to give me some very common sense.

She was absolutely right, too.

Yes, you shouldn’t get an outsider involved with internal affairs—even if Ogi offered to do so.

Upon reconsideration, it wasn't even worth considering.

"Ogi□"

"No, no, no, no. There's no need to be so strangely considerate□it'd only hurt more," Ogi interrupted me. While her tone sounded humble, her stance was firm, unwilling to cede a single step. "Please, you have to let me come along with you□I won't get in your way or anything. I just want to help you in any small way I can. Think of how mean you'd be to agree only to turn me down later."

"Urk."

She'd put me in a tight spot.

Even I could tell that she wasn't saying this because she wanted to help me out□I assumed it was a manifestation of her leering curiosity, but true, it'd be mean to turn her down after saying yes.

"If it's me you're worried about, don't be□I don't mind one bit," she said. "If anything, I'm shocked that you'd be so standoffish after all we've gone through together. Floored, I tell you. I thought we had a relationship."

"What kind of relationship do you and Araragi have, exactly?"

Just as Ogi nearly bowled me over with her pushiness (an Oshino trademark?), or rather, her momentum, Hanekawa jumped in.

I was surprised to see her, of all people, do this. I never saw Hanekawa as the type to insert herself in a situation between two people□but then again, she'd sprinted over here.

When I thought about it that way, of course she was going to butt in.

"You and Araragi met for the first time just three days ago, right?" she asked□still smiling, of course. Going by her smile alone, she was gently scolding a selfish underclassman.

"That's right," Ogi agreed for the moment. "But relationships aren't

always about time—in fact, he and I became kindred spirits in no time at all. We've been locked in a strange classroom together, gone on an adventure in an abandoned home together. The two of us have shared experiences that would normally seem impossible—isn't that right, Araragi-senpai?"

"Hm? Oh, well, yeah."

I mean, I'd been willing to take her out to a sushi-doesn't-go-round when I'm just a high school student. I wouldn't do that unless we were real kindred spirits, huh?

"Oh, I heard," Hanekawa said. "It seems like you've done quite a lot for Araragi—for a very important friend of mine, and so I'd been wanting to thank you." She was now physically getting between me and Ogi in addition to doing so conversationally. And then, for all to hear—

"But of course, I'd have done a better job."

"…"

Ogi went quiet. She froze, with a smile—with something resembling a smile still on her face.

Hold on, what was going on here?

This may have been my first time seeing Hanekawa act this aggressive. Even if it wasn't, it'd been a really long time. Like—spring break, maybe? Spring break—when Tsubasa Hanekawa got between me and a legendary vampire?

"Hmm…"

After a long and heavy silence.

Ogi finally opened her mouth.

"Is that so—yes, I suppose. I'm sure you'd have done a better job, Miss Hanekawa—you're a genius, after all. Yes, I've heard all about that from my uncle."

“When you say your uncle, do you mean Mister Oshino?”

“Yes. I’m his niece, you know.”

This elicited a slight reaction from Hanekawa, who paid a lot of respect to Oshino. You could even say she’d been infatuated with the way he lived. It made sense for her to react to his name—but in that case, you’d think she’d pay his niece some respect too… Her attitude toward Ogi was the opposite of what you’d call respectful.

“Then again—all that genius is meaningless unless you can make use of it. In the end, I was the one to be by his side at those times.”

Ogi slipped away from her position in front of Hanekawa—as if her gaze meant nothing. I doubt I’d be able to move if Hanekawa decided to stare me down head-on—I’d be petrified in more ways than one, but Ogi didn’t seem the least bit daunted.

What mental toughness.

That’s Oshino’s niece for you.

Unbelievably enough, Ogi then tried striking back.

“Your genius is such that even my uncle was frightened of it, I hear—yes, but when I consider that, you’re not quite as impressive as I was led to believe. The Tsubasa Hanekawa I’d heard about—would never be absent when Koyomi Araragi was in danger.”

“…”

“So I’ll graciously accept your thanks. What an honor it is. You may have been able to do a better job, but in the end, you didn’t do anything. And when you say a better job,” provoked Ogi, “don’t you mean back when you were in your prime?”

I could describe her attitude and tone as the same as what she used with me. Ogi treated everyone in the same, consistent way—but while she could say that stuff to me, I wasn’t going to turn a blind eye to her treating Hanekawa this way.

I scolded her. Sternly.

“Hold on, Ogi—what a thing to say. Some lines shouldn’t be crossed. What do you know about Hanekawa, anyway?”

“I don’t know anything,” Ogi replied. Gently. “You’re the one who knows. About Miss Hanekawa’s past and present, and about her future—yes, that, at least, isn’t the kind of thing I should be talking about.”

That, at least.

She spoke as if the existence of other things she should comment on was a given—her tone so certain that it seemed to preclude any further questioning.

“Well, Miss Hanekawa. I’m not foolish enough to try and compete with you. I wouldn’t want to do anything rude and earn the hatred of my beloved senior Araragi—so why don’t we agree to coexist. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Ogi suddenly orbited around to behind where I stood, as if to circumvent Hanekawa—the girl was always at my back before I knew it. And look, now I found myself in between Hanekawa and Ogi. Please, it was the last place I wanted to be.

“Now go ahead, you’re going to visit Miss Senjogahara’s home, aren’t you? Her home seems to be the farther one, so shouldn’t you hurry along?”

“The farther one?” Hanekawa seemed to twitch.

She must have thought that even if Ogi had learned Oikura’s address from me, it was odd for her to know Senjogahara’s—and in that sense, I should have reacted even more myself. After all, I hadn’t given her Oikura’s current address, let alone Senjogahara’s.

But this feeling I got from Ogi.

The feeling that she knew what wasn’t known—I’d gotten pretty accustomed to it.

However menacing and outlandish it may have seemed to Hanekawa.

“No need to worry. If you don’t want your precious friend asking something of an underclassman, that doesn’t have to happen. I was the one to propose it, after all—this can be me deciding on my own to accompany him. Like a guardian spirit.”

A guardian spirit.

It sounded oddly realistic when it came from behind me—though it’s odd to call any statement having to do with spirits realistic.

“You wouldn’t mind that, would you? You know, like the kind of uninvited assistant you see all the time in mystery novels.”

More talk of mystery novels, and at a time like this. I was starting to feel a bit fed up with just how obsessed with them she was. Not that uninvited assistants could be called much of an officially recognized element of mystery fiction—and really, her role was more a detective’s two and three days ago, not an assistant’s.

An uninvited assistant?

This was really starting to sound like fan stuff now.

“I’m sure I’d be of help to him, and knowing that, I couldn’t possibly not be by his side. I can’t just leave him alone when something is troubling him—I’d like to be able to save him.”

“I thought people just go and get saved on their own?” countered Hanekawa.

“That’s my uncle’s stance. Mine is closer to the folktale about the crane who returns a favor.”

“A crane?” Hanekawa sounded confused. She must not have understood what Ogi meant—neither had I. There didn’t seem to be anything crane-like at all about Ogi’s actions.

“Or the story of the old man who offered his umbrellas to Buddhist statues. What I’m trying to say is that my rule is to pay back any

favors with interest. I want people to say, ‘Hey, your gratitude tab wasn’t this big!’ Araragi-senpai has been so kind to me, a fresh transfer to this school—I’d like to repay that favor even if it means putting myself on the line.”

I’d been that kind to her after she transferred? Really? Oh, maybe she meant helping her with her map of the school? True, while I might have been the one to learn the truth behind the class council meeting, I was originally there to help her with her fieldwork. She did tag along with me for my own fieldwork the next day, though… But that was probably what she meant by paying me back with interest.

Not that I knew how serious she was being.

“Araragi.”

Dealing with Ogi would get her nowhere—Hanekawa’s attitude probably wasn’t that extreme, but she called my name. I felt nervous, wondering if she was going to attack me now, but no.

She said this instead.

“Change of plans. I’m going to Miss Oikura’s home too. With you, Araragi.”

This one surprised me.

She almost never changed plans once she’d decided on them—she couldn’t stand fickle policies.

“No complaints then. Right, Ogi? Your problem—is that you don’t want Araragi, a lone boy, going to Miss Oikura’s home. If I go with him, it’s no longer an issue. You have no more pretext.”

“…”

Ogi went silent as she stood at my back. I couldn’t see her at all, and wondered what kind of expression she had on… Could she actually be smiling like always?

Was she keeping it up even after Hanekawa had gotten Ogi’s pretext

right through sheer conjecture?

A moment passed, and then□

“Whether there’s a problem or not, don’t you have to go visit Miss Senjogahara’s home?” said Ogi. “What kind of person puts their good friend last like that?”

“My conversation with her will be a long one, so I’ll ask her to let me stay the night. It’s been a while, but I think we’ll have a pajama party.”

A pajama party?

What an enticing event… Was I invited too? I didn’t have a ticket, but maybe there were plus-ones?

“Good enough for you? After all□I can do a better job than you.”

“Not everything is about how good of a job you can do□a job done too well lacks balance. There’s no happy medium there. Though I do think you know that quite well. But good and bad aside,” Ogi said, “I don’t get to decide. It’s up to Araragi-senpai.”

“Huh?”

“Will you go with me? Or will you go with Miss Hanekawa? I’d like you to decide. We defer to your decision. Both Miss Hanekawa and I will do as you say. Yes?”

Ogi was issuing another challenge to Hanekawa□who wasn’t necessarily accepting it but must’ve thought that her only choice was to go along with it.

“You’re right,” she nodded. “You choose, Araragi. This isn’t something I can force you to do.”

“…”

I’d been given a pretty big choice.

No, like Ogi said□it wasn’t a choice, but a decision.

While the three of us going together seemed like the most peaceful option, now that Hanekawa and Ogi were fairly at odds with each other, it could be dangerous in its own way. We were talking about Oikura, with whom I was at odds myself, and I didn't want to take on any further risk. That said, knowing that a dispute awaited me didn't mean I should choose neither of them—it wasn't going to be that rough.

So I had to make a decision.

Do I visit Oikura with Ogi, or do I visit her with Hanekawa?

Two choices. Pick one.

You could also see this as me having to reject one of two offers, both of which I was happy to have received—so I needed to give this consideration.

Ogi did seem like the better choice.

Yeah.

It's not like fieldwork is a first-come, first-served affair, but she was the first to say she'd go with me. Not to mention, I'd already broken my earlier promise to her (the sushi), and she seemed to be the clear pick as far as anything having to do with Oikura. This all started with our investigation of a school building—it's not as if she bore some sort of responsibility regarding Oikura, but it made sense for her to see this through to the end.

Well, for us to see this through to the end, I guess?

Moreover, as was the case two days ago, I really didn't want Hanekawa to see the acrimony between me and Oikura—while Hanekawa might be able to mediate between us, I just didn't feel good about arguing with Oikura in her presence. Ogi apparently looked untrustworthy to Hanekawa—which is why she was worried for me, but that was my fault for misrepresenting her.

I'd take responsibility for the rift between the two by creating an opportunity to mend it at a later date, but for now, it seemed best if I visited Oikura with Ogi while Hanekawa just went to

Senjogahara's place as originally planned.

Just as I was about to reach this conclusion, Ogi spoke as if to help me along.

"Hey, senpai. You don't want to trouble someone you're already indebted to over a personal issue. If it's an internal affair, she's just as external to it as I am. You'd never put Miss Hanekawa in a bad spot, right?"

Why yes, Ogi was exactly right. The girl always said the rightest things.

"I promise if you go with me, then no matter what mystery we find there, I'll present you with yet another solution."

"…"

Well, if she was willing to go that far my conclusion was on the verge of making its way out of my throat, but that was when it happened. Hanekawa followed suit with an expression that was more serious than anything I'd ever seen on her face.

"I promise too, Araragi. If you go with me," she said, "I'll let you touch my boobs."

006

And so, Hanekawa and I now arrived at Oikura's home.

Given how many times she'd moved, I was a bit worried, but as if to allay my fears, what stood before us was at least an apartment building that didn't seem very old—and not a derelict house.

"Room 444? The number for death three times in a row, I guess the management here isn't too spiritual."

"This might actually be public housing, not a commercial apartment building."

We climbed the stairs as we talked. The place had no elevator—while it wasn't old, it was hardly modern. It somehow lacked the kind of glamor we youngsters associate with living on one's own. If anything, it looked like a place for families…

That she would be living alone in a place for families seemed off in its own way—here was Hanekawa's view on that.

"She—Miss Oikura—must be getting some sort of subsidy."

"A subsidy?"

"Yes. From the government—and it feels like they might have introduced her to this complex as a part of that."

"…"

If Hanekawa's conjecture was right and Oikura did receive a subsidy from the state or local government—it wasn't hard to see why. She'd been living in a house that could be mistaken for an abandoned home—and when I considered her circumstances at the beginning of our relationship, during our time in elementary school…

But why had I forgotten something that even Sengoku remembered? No, it wasn't just me—what about my sisters?

I still hadn't gotten an opportunity to ask them, but…I wondered, did Karen and Tsukihi remember Sodachi Oikura?

"Now that I think of it, maybe I'm a cold guy—I'd forgotten about Sengoku too, after all. I didn't recognize her at first."

"I don't think you can be blamed for that. You didn't have a particularly memorable relationship with Sengoku or Miss Oikura at the time, right?"

Well, sure.

Still, it was one thing to forget Sengoku, whom Tsukihi had brought over as a friend—I should've established the kind of relationship with Oikura that persisted in my mind. Had I done so, I probably wouldn't have overlooked her SOS during our first year of middle school. Even the class council meeting during our first year of high school—might never have taken place.

"Don't blame your past self too much. That's not reflection, you know," Hanekawa said upon seeing my expression. "Making your past self the villain and protecting your present self will make you repeat the same mistakes forever—just imagine. Living the kind of life where you're always being blamed by your future self? Does that seem like fun to you?"

"There's nothing fun about it."

Not fun.

The words felt different when they came from a girl who didn't blame or attack the past but faced it head-on. They carried weight.

That's right.

This was about the here and now, not the past.

How I acted here—how I faced Oikura. Not the old Oikura, but Oikura now. It was about what I was going to do, not what I did

back then—however trite that may sound.

We arrived on the fourth floor, where Oikura lived. As a mockery of a vampire, my breathing was of course unbothered by the trip, but Hanekawa's was calm too. She really was an all-powerful class president. Even her base stamina was impressive.

"Okay, Araragi. Just wait a second."

"Hm? Here in the stairwell? Why?"

"Miss Oikura lives alone, right? It might be embarrassing if we rang the doorbell and she came out still in pajamas or loungewear."

"…"

I couldn't believe she had such an unlikely scenario in mind… With defenses like that, no wonder I never had the chance to see Hanekawa in street clothes.

I just did as I was told.

The stuff about pajamas aside, it was probably a good idea to have Oikura speak to Hanekawa alone at first—though of course I'd leap out if I detected even the slightest attempt to harm Hanekawa coming from Oikura.

And so, Hanekawa went up to Oikura's door alone and rang the intercom. Judging by the sound, it wasn't a modern one with a camera or the feature to talk through it—more of a doorbell. You could either talk to someone from the other side of the door or open it and come outside—only increasing the chances of an embarrassing moment.

The class president was amazing.

She'd managed to avoid an entire scene.

But while I was busy admiring her judgment, what happened surpassed her judgment—or undercut it.

The door did open.

It seemed to have a chain attached to it, so I could hear a clang as it ran its length.

I then heard Oikura's voice.

"Who's there."

While I thought her careless for simply opening her door for an unidentified visitor, chain or not, maybe she'd seen someone wearing her school's uniform through a fisheye lens. Even if she couldn't identify Hanekawa, a girl she'd barely crossed paths with a few days earlier, she'd at least open the door for someone from school, a student and a girl—making me think that she may not have opened it had I been standing there.

Good thing I hadn't come on my own, I thought as Hanekawa and Oikura began going back and forth. I call it a back and forth, but it didn't seem like much of a conversation—Hanekawa was doggedly trying to persuade Oikura.

Even she couldn't make it happen, though…

I heard them both talk for a bit, in the dark about what they were discussing—was Hanekawa asking for Oikura to let her in, or to come back to school? No, it seemed like something else. What could they be arguing about?

While I say arguing, it was nothing like what happened earlier by the school gates with Ogi. I decided I didn't need to leap out of the shadows.

What was that ghastly showdown, anyway?

Many of you might have gotten the wrong idea, but I didn't choose Hanekawa to be my partner over Ogi because I was ensorcelled by her chest—I chose her because I sensed something far out of the ordinary if the situation was pushing her to say what she did.

Perhaps, as Ogi said, Hanekawa was past her prime, and I should have come here with Ogi given the flow of things. Perhaps Hanekawa was all wrong about Ogi, and I was putting my friend in harm's way for no good reason.

But I didn't want to become someone who couldn't choose Hanekawa after she went that far—after she said that for me. Even if Hanekawa was wrong, even if I was wrong, Tsubasa Hanekawa had to be the right answer to that question.

I did feel bad for Ogi, though…

I'd make sure to follow up. Yes, I'd become the kind of person capable of that, too.

That's right, I don't know about stationary sushi, but I could at least take her to a revolving place…

As I was thinking about all this, Hanekawa returned to where I stood—she seemed somehow exhausted. Maybe she'd been turned away unceremoniously? No, she wouldn't just give up. What was it, then? What happened?

"It's okay, Araragi. Come out," she said listlessly.

Her eyes were dead… Just how unproductive of a conversation was it?

"I can come out? But—"

"You can go in. Into her apartment. But to spoil it for you, she's still in her pajamas."

"Hm? Wait, but isn't that exactly what you were trying to prevent?"

"She said you aren't worth the effort of changing clothes… I tried my best to convince her otherwise, but the more I argued, the more stubborn she got. Eventually she said she wouldn't change under any circumstances, and that if I kept arguing she'd come out here naked."

So I bent, Hanekawa said.

Oikura had been menacing—though on a matter that was as stupid as could be.

"Don't worry. Even I'm not so shallow enough to get excited over a

girl wearing pajamas in this kind of situation.”

“I don’t know,” Hanekawa said, wounding me with a doubtful look. “Coming from someone who’s just after my boobs…”

“…”

She understood less about the way I felt than anyone.

Sad, but then, who could blame her—let bygones be bygones (though we’re talking about my own past behavior), and face the present instead.

Hanekawa was one thing, but why wasn’t Oikura shooing me away—probably because it’d spell defeat. She’d refused to change clothes for the same reason. Now that the gates were open, though, I had to step through them. Even if she’d raised the portcullis just to declare war, my only choice was to accept.

Because that—was probably my role as Sodachi Oikura’s childhood friend.

007

Childhood friends.

I'd never even considered that I always had one, but it seemed that my relationship with Oikura was something infinitesimally close to that fantasy. She was a childhood friend, or maybe a friend from long ago—in any case, I, Koyomi Araragi, and she, Sodachi Oikura, had been well acquainted.

The circumstances were slightly unusual, though. She didn't live nearby the way Sengoku did, nor did we go to the same elementary school—so allow me to give a brief explanation of these slightly unusual circumstances before I face Oikura. I'm very sorry to all of you who were looking forward to Oikura in her pajamas, but stay with me for a moment as I talk about the past.

Both of my parents work as police officers, and I've done my best not to tell anyone ever since I was little. From before I can remember. A question on my homework might say, "What do your mom and dad do," and I still wouldn't reveal their profession. Why did I so assiduously conceal my parents' job? Looking back on it, the answer is that I did as my parents said, at least as a child. In other words, they'd taught me not to discuss their work if at all possible—it's not a memory that comes up unless I try to recall it, but this seems to be the reason.

As a too-obedient youth, I did as they said without asking why. And I've swallowed it whole from then to the present day—but now that I think about it, the admonition had dual meanings. One was ethical: I shouldn't be frivolous and recklessly publicize to strangers that my parents are police, a profession with some social significance. My parents sought what was right and wanted to instill a lesson with their gag order—from a reasoning standpoint. As for the other meaning, you could say it was their emotions speaking, not any sort of reasoning. In other words, publicizing that my

parents were police officers could expose me to danger—it was a management issue.

Risk management, so to speak—my parents were worried that their jobs could result in harm coming to their kids. While it was overprotective in a way, I don't think you could call it overblown. At least, I understand their concerns now that I'm eighteen. I'd lived my life simply proud of the fact that my parents were both police officers and wanted to brag about it—so while at first I might have questioned or even felt scared about not being able to tell anyone, I was won over by my parents' warning that heroes ought to hide their true identities.

Of course, now you have Karen, too stupid to hide her parents' profession well, and Tsukihi, who makes full and skillful use of the fact that her parents are police officers—the existence of Tsuganoki Second Middle School's Fire Sisters have made it almost pointless to keep hiding my parents' occupation—but as they say, old habits die hard. Just as it's hard to parse the actual meaning of that phrase off the cuff—do old habits suffer intense deaths?—once an act is etched into your mind, it's hard to correct even if you lose sight of the original goal or your memory of it altogether. So I've continued to hide what my parents do, and you could call it meaningless if you want…but there was at least a reason behind my actions or lack thereof back during my first year of middle school. Back when I spent an entire summer with a younger Oikura.

The summer I spent in a derelict house.

The summer I spent growing to love math.

I already knew, thanks to Ogi, what that summer hid—I'd ignored the SOS Oikura sent me, but then, she shouldn't have known the premise for that SOS, namely my parents' job.

Even my few friends didn't know what they did, so how could Oikura have found out? The precise question Hanekawa tossed my way early yesterday morning.

I didn't have an answer.

I didn't have any idea—I felt at the time that it hinted at some special relationship with Oikura, but without any basis in fact. What exactly did she know about me? How much did she know? It felt nothing short of uncanny, but if there was something else between me and her, it had to be from back in elementary school…

Yet my memories of our first year in middle school were fuzzy enough. How was I supposed to recall even-more distant memories of my time in elementary?

As I worried myself, Hanekawa, who'd presented the doubt to me in the first place, advised, "If you just can't remember, why not try asking your parents? Your parents watch you, you know—well, how convincing, coming from me, but as far as I know, your father and mother kept a proper eye on you."

They did seem proper, she said.

Hmm—I didn't expect her to understand all the current strife between me and my parents, but the words came from someone who'd come in contact with them. For certain reasons, she'd stayed at the Araragi residence during my own absence.

I could allow it—not that I was in a position to sound so high and mighty. I decided to take her advice without a second thought—these were Hanekawa's words at the end of the day. She could tell me to eat a shoe and I just might.

Sure enough, the answer became clear.

Oikura and I had met during elementary school—

In other words, we were childhood friends.

To be precise, it happened around the time I was a sixth grader—around the time I played with Sengoku and other friends Tsukihi would bring over.

That's when I met Sodachi Oikura.

It's not like we played together, though, and we didn't attend the same school, either. I'm sure she would have been more memorable

if she did—my memory of her might have been different, too. At least, I'd have talked to her and retained memories of her, just like how I spoke to Sengoku and retained memories of her—even if Oikura had a different name back then.

It impressed me that Sengoku did remember her, but according to Sengoku, "Nadeko doesn't have many memories of her time in elementary, so she really remembers playing with Tsukihi—we called her Rara then. And of course, Nadeko's time playing with you too, Big Brother Koyomi."

She says the cutest things—but whatever the case, I never played with Oikura.

We didn't go to the same school, we didn't play together, and she wasn't even a neighbor. I could see how you might want to ask if we could really be called childhood friends—but however temporary a period in your life.

If you live with someone, whether you play with them or not, regardless of how short the time, can't you call that person a childhood friend?

I think you can, at least.

I might have worded this all in a slightly confusing way, but in essence—something happened one day.

One day.

I say that like I'm recalling all of this, but unlike the class council meeting I never forgot or the summer at the derelict house I did recollect, I honestly and truly don't remember. It's nowhere to be found in my memories. I asked my parents, and it's what they told me—and Sengoku remembered it, so I've verified it. For my part, I've lost any and all memories of it. I doubt I'll ever recover them—but anyway, one day.

My parents brought a girl home with them.

This girl, of course, was Sodachi Oikura, as she's called now. Apparently, they told me and my two sisters that she'd be staying

with us for a while, so we should be nice to her—without any real explanation.

At the time, I was a child who saw no one and nothing as more important than my parents. Karen and Tsukihi were still young, in third and second grade, respectively—so we didn't particularly object to this sudden and unexplained notification, but I now know why, and I also know why they couldn't tell their elementary-aged children why.

In other words, my parents had taken the juvenile Oikura to their own home as a way to protect her from her "household"—the "household" where violence must have been running rampant.

This is only a guess, since I don't know for sure how society worked at the time, but I assume it was even harder than it is now for a public agency to enter into a private household. My parents' actions—temporarily taking Oikura into their own home—were probably what you'd call borderline, or at least not something to be officially recognized. What you might call extralegal measures—my parents didn't go into details here. What's important is that Oikura lived in my home, and that she met me then, and—however obvious this might be, she knew what my parents did.

So it was simple.

Oikura had met my parents, police officers—it wasn't about having any info.

In that case, Ogi's reasoning required a bit of correction, or maybe a few small adjustments—the outline might not change, but it did also answer Hanekawa's question. I'll start getting into that later—but as far as how the juvenile Oikura whom I didn't remember at all acted, according to my parents, and according to Sengoku, she was a girl who didn't talk at all. It must have been extreme if an introvert like Sengoku described her that way—at the same time, I've met another girl who wouldn't talk, making it easier for me to imagine. I mean, of course, Shinobu Oshino back when she lived in the abandoned cram school and not in my shadow—Shinobu back when all she did was glare at me without a single sound making it out of her mouth.

“It seemed like you had someone kind of strange with you. She didn’t want to play with us, but she didn’t try to leave the room, either—and she wouldn’t talk.”

Sengoku’s words.

The more I heard about this girl, the more she sounded like the former Shinobu, but the former Shinobu had a good reason not to talk or budge—in other words, we should assume that juvenile Oikura had one as well.

Her household environment, most likely—juvenile Oikura wouldn’t open her heart even after being taken into protection, which is to say at our home. No, it’s hard to tell if she even understood what a household was—my mother said.

It also seemed like she didn’t understand why she was with us, causing her to stiffen up—my mother continued.

She might have actually seen it at the time as being abducted and taken to an unknown home. Even if she didn’t, she might not have known what it meant to be taken into protection—according to my mother again.

God.

Not something you could tell a child.

In any case, what I heard about Oikura’s personality back then was different from her personality at any of the times I’d known her. It seemed inconsistent. Weren’t we talking about a totally different person who happened to be around the same age? But as far as I could tell from descriptions of her appearance, it was indeed Oikura.

Sodachi Oikura.

I couldn’t help but wonder which was the true Sodachi Oikura, but I suppose the answer would be: They’re all Sodachi Oikura. She wouldn’t want me talking about her “true self” like I knew anything about her, at the very least—so.

I was totally unable to recall the fact that juvenile Oikura had temporarily stayed at my home, that we once lived together—I felt a little bewildered at this truth delivered by my parents and Sengoku (I'd be lying if I said that no part of me wondered if they might be conspiring to trick me, but how would my parents and Sengoku get their stories straight?). However, it did bring one clear fact back to mind. Not about Oikura, or about when she was around, but…

I remembered how the juvenile Oikura disappeared.

The feeling that someone had left our home—that I'd lost something.

I could liken it to the feeling of losing sight of what is just and right during that class council meeting—or of losing a kindred spirit at that abandoned home.

That feeling of loss.

She'd been the first one to plant it in me.

I didn't know what it was, but I'd experienced losing something, or having lost something—and I now recalled it clearly.

That feeling of loss.

I remembered.

However it happened, she suddenly disappeared—though it seems that juvenile Oikura had decided on her own to return to her home.

On her own…

Her parents hadn't come to get her back, nor had mine decided they couldn't keep her under their protection anymore for whatever reason—juvenile Oikura decided on her own to leave my home to return to her home.

I guess that at the end of the day, children's parents are their parents, and their only home is their home—however wretched those parents and miserable that home may be.

That's how my dad put it—and maybe he was right. At least,

juvenile Oikura must have thought so and found her actions to be correct when she disappeared.

My parents didn't go into detail about that, either, but I'm sure there were more troubles after she returned home—when I think of the future that awaited her, Oikura's case must not have been resolved in any way my parents had hoped for.

It's hard for a DV situation to be resolved unless someone on the inside sends out an SOS—if no one thinks the problem is a problem, no one is going to go solve it.

That's how my parents wrapped things up.

They must have jumped to the conclusion that I'd suddenly recalled something from when I was a child—that I'd remembered the juvenile who once lived with us. I'd come to ask them about her—but in fact, I hadn't remembered anything at all and only knew about the episodes that followed.

About what was in store for Sodachi Oikura.

Her tragic life.

She'd tried to send out an SOS to my parents through me about a year later—and her SOS had stopped at me.

I didn't remember Oikura when we found ourselves at the same middle school—I never had the chance to see her there because we were in different classes, but I still had no clue who she was even when we met in the derelict house. Of course, her personality had changed completely, and of course, she gave off a very different vibe, but—

Given the fact that she left our home without any notice, without a word, I can't help but think that the reason I didn't was that I'd lost her in more ways than one.

She vanished.

And I was a cold person.

008

She looked even more pajamaed than I expected.

I'd prepared myself emotionally for this, and as a man who'd made it through countless battlefields, I felt ready for any strange twist or turn, but there in the public-housing unit stood the very image of a girl in pajamas that a high school boy would conjure, a fastball straight down the middle.

Hanekawa whispered in my ear.

"I think her sense of fashion ended up getting refined in this direction because of how long she's spent in her room…"

A-ha.

Just as Hanekawa's household environment caused her own sense of fashion to head in an "underwear" direction? But more pressing than that was the danger posed by Hanekawa whispering in my ear and making me feel like nothing else really mattered. Unlike the sensation of Ogi whispering in my ear□not that the two could be compared.

Oikura undid the door chain and greeted us with an imposing stance, her arms folded. With what seemed like swagger, she said, "I'm impressed you came. I have to admit, I admire your guts, AraraG…"

AraraG?

Huh? I wondered what kind of mean-spirited abuse this could be, but she'd simply misspoken.

"Agh…" She scowled openly. "Why's your name have to be so impopossible to renounce…" she misspoke yet again (I assume she was trying to say "impossible to pronounce"). It might have been

cute if she'd followed up with Sorry, a slip of the tongue, but she only turned her back to me and walked down the hall.

Stomp, stomp.

Hanekawa closed the door behind us and locked it. If I'm being honest, part of me wanted her to leave it unlocked so it'd be easier to escape, but I didn't see that happening□yes, I needed to emulate Hanekawa's mental toughness at times like these.

Especially if I was about to face Oikura.

Hanekawa took off her shoes and passed by me.

With these hushed words: "This is a family rental, two bedrooms with a living room, dining room, and kitchen. But there are only two pairs of women's shoes here, and they're the same size. We now know for a fact she lives alone. She might be acting that way, but from the smell in the air, I think she made some tea while I went to get you, so be ready to thank her."

My brain couldn't process so much sudden info□though it was also incredible that she'd grasped the layout of the entire home just by entering it.

It hadn't even crossed my mind that we might have bad info, that Oikura might not be living alone□was Tsubasa Hanekawa still in her prime, or what? If anything, she might have grown by facing her past and her self□and she was in fact right, tea sat ready there in the dining room.

She wasn't entirely right, though. There were only two cups of tea□one in front of Oikura, seated at the table, and another. In short, no tea for me.

I guess even Hanekawa couldn't fully comprehend just how much Oikura hated me? Not that it bothered me now.

The spartan room actually attracted more of my attention. No, it went beyond attention. The room felt horribly off, like some sort of spot-the-mistake puzzle.

There was a table. But only one chair, which Oikura sat in—even if she'd put them away out of spite for me, she'd have left one for Hanekawa, so there must have only been one from the start.

No curtains. Well, lace curtains. But that was all. Looking up at the ceiling, I found only one fluorescent bulb.

I thought back and remembered the welcome mat at the entrance, but the rooms contained no rugs or carpets. The tea seemed to come with everything you'd want—sugar, milk, spoons—but the cups weren't on saucers.

There were lots of other things. It felt like just a little was always missing from these rooms—revealing not so much their tenant's disposition, but the fact that something was off, even uncanny.

If I were to be less delicate, I'd say it went beyond uncanny and made it all the way to unsightly—Hanekawa must have had an even stronger sense of this bizarre feeling but betrayed no signs of it.

"Um," she began.

With no chair, she of course couldn't sit, but she faced Oikura from across the table.

"You seem to be doing well, Miss Oikura. I'm glad."

"Yeah? Does it really seem that way?" retorted Oikura, pointing at her cheek. It didn't look too bad, but it was red and swollen—you could say that was to be expected, since she'd been punched there. Senjogahara's slapped cheek was surely still swollen as well, though. "I can't believe it… Just how big of an act was that girl putting on? I knew she was more than a sickly, mild-mannered girl, but still…"

Then Oikura looked—or glared at me.

"You know, maybe I should sue her for assault. I'll go to a doctor before this swelling subsides and get a medical certificate. Shouldn't that be enough to get her recommendation or whatever taken away?"

“You two are even. You did hit her first. It’d be considered self-defense if it came down to it.”

“I wonder about that,” Oikura threw out. True, it might be hard to claim self-defense in that situation. Not so much even, they were both losers here.

I sighed and glanced at Hanekawa. I tried to make eye contact with her. Would my point get across to her—I wondered, but forget about reciprocating, Hanekawa was already on the move.

How sharp was she?

I’d tried to make eye contact with air—what could feel emptier than that? Anyway, with a natural motion, Hanekawa reached for the cup of tea.

It’s human reflex to notice motion in your field of vision—and the glaring Oikura was no exception as her eyes followed Hanekawa.

I quickly went around the table as if to leap on this moment and touched Oikura’s cheek, which is to say her injury, with my index finger.

“Hey… What’re you…”

Oikura’s chair swung back and thunked against the floor, but it was too late. I’d returned to my original position like some kind of touch-and-go—not that I particularly needed to rush back once I’d accomplished my goal, but I might get slapped if I stayed around for too long…

“Wh-What’re you… Poking my cheek? Again and again?! You think we’re so close it’s okay to mess around with me like that? Are you trying to get yourself sued?!”

Putting aside whether or not poking someone’s cheek is a crime (and I didn’t do it again and again)—I pointed at Oikura with the opposite hand as the one I poked her with. The index finger of the hand I used to poke her cheek was still bleeding from a safety-pin prick—though it would soon heal.

Just like her cheek.

“I don’t think you’d be able to get a medical certificate if you went to a doctor with that cheek, Oikura.”

“Huh? Hm? What?”

She seemed to marvel at the cheek I’d healed using my blood□which is to say, a vampire’s□as if she didn’t know what was going on. Well, of course she didn’t, who would ever think that a poke would heal your cheek? She must have interpreted it as nothing more than a way to ascertain whether or not it had healed.

While part of it must have been her unwillingness to believe in a supernatural phenomenon, I also think she hated having any kind of favor bestowed on her by me. I doubt she was being serious when she said she’d sue Senjogahara, but it was also true that my girlfriend had gone a little too far in hitting Oikura with a closed fist. Sorting out the aftermath seemed like the right thing to do.

“Gah… That swelling healed after just two nights? I can’t believe how fast my body recovers…”

She credited her own recuperative abilities for erasing her basis for harassing me, and seemed chagrined that her anger had lost its focal point.

Hanekawa didn’t take the cup she’d reached for. Instead, she returned to her original position.

“It looks like you’re healthy and fine,” she said. “You’ll be able to come back to school starting tomorrow, won’t you, Miss Oikura?”

“So you’re here as class president? Um…Miss Hanekawa, was it?”

Whether Oikura really didn’t remember Hanekawa or was just playing dumb, I couldn’t be sure. As someone who hadn’t been to school since the first term of her first year, she wouldn’t know just how much of a threat Hanekawa posed…which meant that Oikura faced a towering foe without even realizing it. The power imbalance between the two seemed comical from where I stood, but it also presented a problem.

Sodachi Oikura—the current Sodachi Oikura was just so weak, so notably fragile that a jab from us to test the waters could demolish her.

“That’s right. Tsubasa Hanekawa,” Hanekawa replied with a smile.

Well, she didn’t have any sort of vested interest in Oikura the way Senjogahara and I did. The situation between the two couldn’t turn that oppositional.

I was feeling glad that I’d come here with Hanekawa—but I couldn’t allow myself to rely on that fact. She’d tried to send me here on my own at first because she thought that would be the better move. Either for my sake or Oikura’s.

Ogi prevented that from happening—and the current situation wasn’t what Hanekawa had hoped for.

“So I guess you came to get me because the teachers asked you? Um… Who was our homeroom teacher again?”

“Hoshina, a very good homeroom teacher.”

“A good teacher? Are you trying to claim that good teachers exist?”

Oikura had a grin on her face. It might be a grimace, but it was probably the former—there was no need here to grin through any pain.

So she did know about Tetsujo.

Ogi’s reasoning that said Oikura had come to school because Tetsujo was gone seemed to be right on the mark.

“I know because I used to be class president myself—aren’t you just letting yourself be used however the teachers want, Miss Hanekawa?”

“Hm. Hmm. I never thought about it that way, but you’re right, I suppose you could see it that way,” Hanekawa deflected Oikura’s spiteful words. This kind of reply, neither a denial nor an acceptance, was the most effective way to deal with Oikura as she

was now. You could really see Tsubasa Hanekawa's skill from the fact that even her small talk had a point to it.

While she was out-argued as far as the pajamas, you could say she was conceding a point she could afford to lose, letting Oikura save face ahead of time.

Or perhaps it was just making Hanekawa more serious.

As for Oikura, she wasn't even a shadow of her former self, but once upon a time she'd been the brave and widely known leader of our class. She seemed to realize through this brief exchange that Tsubasa Hanekawa was no mere class president, and stopped saying anything unnecessary that might come off as aggressive. She must not have wanted to find herself on the wrong side of a surprise attack.

Pride had something to do with her inviting us into her room, but it was her terrain, quite literally her home turf (and in fact, she did act more self-assured compared to the way she'd been in our classroom). But it appeared as though she noticed the situation before her wasn't exactly what she'd imagined. Not that the Oikura we now faced would ever consider retreating unlike two years ago.

Her eyes, which is to say her crosshairs, were back on me.

She focused her gaze and took aim.

"So," she said. "I can see why Miss Hanekawa is here, but why you? A A, ra, ra, gi."

She said my name slowly this time so as not to stumble over it.

"I don't want to have to see your face, and I'm sure you don't want to have to see mine either. As far as I remember, the two of us are on horrible terms. Or perhaps I am mistaken?"

I could hear her forcing herself to sound polite like some sort of elementary school student.

But I saw this as an opportunity it'd be pointless to wait for the perfect moment. There was no such thing as a best or right moment

when it came to me and Oikura. Even if one did exist, it was two years, five years, maybe even six years ago. It had long passed. For now, I'd just think about avoiding the worst possible moment.

I'd just think about Oikura.

For now, I'd exist for her.

"You're not mistaken. But I think there's more to it than that isn't that what you taught me the day before yesterday?"

"!"

She looked shocked.

Was my recollection of the derelict house that unforeseen? Or maybe she just found it unfortunate.

But if it was, I doubled down.

"There's even what happened in elementary school."

"Ah… Mh"

Oikura then did something unexpected. She snatched her teacup and threw it at me!

This left a bitter taste in my mouth. No, not the tea, the situation.

A ballpoint pen was one thing (though she did get me with one of those as well), but how could I dodge an airborne splash of liquid? I wasn't capable of the kind of teleportation that would require. I'd be covered in freshly brewed tea the burns would be one thing, but what really worried me was that Oikura would see them healing. She might even connect the dots and figure out that I'd healed her cheek.

My mind worked through all of this, but my body didn't react. Even if it did, this was the kind of crisis where I could only hunch over but Hanekawa saved me yet again.

I don't know when, I really don't, but she'd taken a half-step in my

direction and stopped the flying cup before it could hit me.

No.

She didn't stop it, she took it.

She didn't sacrifice herself to protect me, not at all. She simply reached out, grabbed the handle of the cup as it spun through the air, twirled it in her hand seemingly around the overflowing liquid to kill its momentum, and placed it right back on the table. A little spilled out when she put it there, but no more.

Oikura's eyes were wide open.

The girl who had her thin-eyed glare on me this entire time. Not that I could blame her, I knew just how amazing Hanekawa was, and I bet I was just as wide-eyed.

It really did seem like she'd leveled up after what happened on the heels of summer break… Or maybe, in the past, she wouldn't have spilled a single drop at the end there.

"Hm? Oh, you know. I was prepared, thinking it might be dangerous if Miss Oikura threw her tea… I learned my lesson after being unable to stop Miss Senjogahara the day before yesterday."

"…"

Lesson? She'd earned an entire degree.

You could never be too careful around this girl when she learned her lessons.

So far, the only issue she hadn't been able to neutralize was Oikura's pajamas… It was like I couldn't even get into trouble around her.

Even if she'd conceded or surrendered the point with the pajamas, it felt like she'd already earned it back□I began to think that I might go right back to my conversation with Oikura, but of course, life is never that simple.

Whatever inhuman danger-foiling skills Hanekawa boasted, in the end, it was Oikura that I had to face, not her.

Koyomi Araragi did.

“Oikura,” I said.

With resolve.

“Let’s talk about the past. About you and me.”

“…”

Oikura went quiet for a moment. And then

“I hate you,” she said.

Words I’d heard a number of times already.

Even so, they hurt me every time she said them.

009

“I want you to find my missing mother.”

Many twists and turns later.

Oikura eventually said this.

“If you do, I wouldn’t mind going to school for you□or even apologizing to Miss Senjogahara.”

To explain how our discussion ended in such a bizarre, or even off-the-mark place, I need to go into Sodachi Oikura’s history from her perspective. In other words, how she spent her days after leaving this town□and the kind of person she was, there out of my sight.

That kind of story.

A manhunt is of course a staple element of mysteries, whodunnits, and detective stories, so it’s not as if this twist turned us in a weird direction. If anything, it flowed naturally□but I still need to describe the channel that it took to this point.

“So you remembered… What’s more, it looks like you’ve finally understood what I tried to do back then, after five whole years. Which means□you must really think I’m an idiot,” Oikura began.

Bitterly.

Hanekawa taking the teacup must have been impossible for her to process because she was pretending that it never happened.

“The way I tried so hard to pander to you and get you to save me…”

“Pander to me?”

Is that how she saw it?

During the summer break I'd remembered—I had been the fool for not answering her call for help. It could even sound like a heartwarming episode in the hands of a skilled narrator, but Oikura describing her fey demeanor and joyful smile as "pandering" only trampled on my tattered memories.

I couldn't complain, though.

Yes, it was the same memory as mine, but seen through her eyes—however she wanted to tarnish it was her choice and hers alone.

Still, how could you describe it as anything but bankrupt when she criticized me for forgetting about it and cursed me for remembering it? Not that I wanted to put any failures of her current personality up for debate after everything we'd gone through…

"Wh-What an idiot," she said.

I fully assumed this to be more abuse hurled my way—her sneering at me for never noticing, when she'd kindly taught me math.

But I was wrong—this time I was wrong.

The "idiot" she talked about was herself this time.

"What an idiot, what an idiot, what an idiot… I am such an idiot! I-I'm so embarrassed that I ever pandered to someone like you hoping you'd save me! I-I threw away my pride to flatter and suck up to someone like you! I licked your boots clean! Emotionally!"

"…"

"I tried to fix one failure and failed in an even worse way… I'm so embarrassed, I'm so ashamed! I'm so embarrassed, I'm so ashamed—I want to die!"

I want to disappear!

She screamed and collapsed on the table.

I heard an awful whack.

It sounded so bad I thought she might have split her head open—but her face rose seconds later. She returned looking determined. A grinning, resolute, threatening look. What kind of switch had been flipped in her mind?

I want to disappear.

Literally speaking, she did “disappear”…

The failure she’d tried to fix must have meant her custody at the Araragi residence—where she said nothing and opened up to no one. She must have meant the way she failed by not pandering to anyone, if you wanted to put it that way, and going back to her desolate home alone.

If that had resulted in her roundabout cry for help, I did have to admit she’d made a distinctive, or rather, a very unusual choice—but it also underscored the reason why she couldn’t go directly to my parents for that help. In short, she felt self-conscious about how she’d swatted away their outstretched hands in the past.

“But, Araragi. I think the same thing would have happened, even if it wasn’t me. I don’t think there’s anything special about my misfortune. These kinds of things. They happen all the time. Don’t you think? You couldn’t possibly feel any sympathy for me.”

“…”

“There are a lot of people in worse situations than me. All over Japan. All over the world. All over the papers. I don’t have some incurable disease, I’m not starving, I’m not caught up in some war, I’m not getting beaten by some stranger for no good reason. I’m not misfortunate, I’m not misfortunate, I’m not misfortunate. Right? Don’t you agree?”

“…”

Though she was asking me to agree with her, I couldn’t say anything—if there was one thing I could say, her misfortune was so deep that pointing to people who were more misfortunate was the

only way she could affirm herself.

There are a lot of people in worse situations than me—that's not something you say about yourself, is it?

"So don't take pity on me—it makes me want to die when someone I hate as much as you takes pity on me."

"I don't think there's anything I could say to you that would make a difference. Because I haven't paid you back in any way for what I received from you."

I was water that thought I'd made myself boil.

I had only been on the receiving end with Oikura—in other words, I only ever took from her. There was nothing I could give her now, nothing that could be taken back.

"So if you say not to pity you, I won't. If you say you don't want me to atone, I of course won't."

"What, are you trying to act cool or something? Do you think you're being gallant with that attitude? You're a decent human being? Is that supposed to be manly? All you're doing is giving up."

"Yeah—but aren't I giving up in the same way you did?"

Oh no.

I argued back without thinking—I always let my guard down when it feels like I'm in a real conversation. In reality, only I felt that way. It was a one-way street—or two opposing lanes of traffic, right and left, cars zooming by one another, head-on collisions just one little steering error away.

I thought she might throw something at me again, but nothing sat in front of her, even her spoon or sugar bowl. On further inspection, Hanekawa had them all for some reason—when did she take the opportunity to confiscate them? I hadn't noticed…

Hanekawa wasn't inserting herself into our individual strokes, but she would at least create a situation that allowed us to rally. Her

position was more a referee's than a partner's, but I was grateful to have someone who'd make fair calls.

"What was I supposed to do? It wasn't my fault. It's my parents' fault that I give up, that I run away whenever things are too much for me."

It's my parents' fault.

Oikura spoke begrudgingly. She threw words my way instead of objects—words that made flying objects seem like the more preferable of the two.

"It's my parents' responsibility that I'm like this now."

"What are those parents doing now?"

"Oh? What's this, you're worried about me! Little old me and my family situation! Why the change, you never once stopped to consider it back in middle school."

Words soaked in cutting sarcasm, but the kind of sarcasm that seemed to wound the speaker too. They could only have come from someone who'd been cut to the bone.

"They had themselves a happy divorce after you didn't save me. My mother took me and left this town… As for what my male parent is doing now, I don't have the first clue."

My male parent—that was how she put it.

It was quite clear how she felt about him. Which suggested that it was her father who'd wrought havoc on that house—he must've been responsible for the violence in that trashed household.

I wasn't expecting Oikura to have enough extra room in her mind at this point to figure out my line of thinking, but she said, "That's right. My male parent made that house the way it was. That piece of trash."

Her face was red, but with what seemed like shame, not anger—perhaps she felt embarrassed over being such a fool in

elementary school that she made the decision to return to the custody of such a piece of trash.

Or perhaps she felt like there was no period in her life when she wasn't a fool—and it embarrassed her.

"My mother would hit me now and then, that's all. To take her mind off of him hitting her," she continued—then paused for a moment, as if to wait for my reaction. She had just told us about being the final link in a chain of violence—but didn't seek compassion. Not at all. So I had no idea at all how to respond, or what the right answer was.

Once, she'd wanted me to save her—what did she want now?

I didn't know.

The question seemed worse than illogical.

In the end, all I could do was ask a question.

"Did you decide then to go with your mother, since she was the better choice of the two?"

But Oikura only sneered back.

"Do you think I was in a position to make any kind of decision? Back then—adults just made all the decisions on their own. I guess you could say my mother was the better choice, but really, society must have seen her as a victim when I look back on it now—and I thought the same back then, too."

Just as she thought her male parent was her father back in elementary school, she thought her mother was a victim back in middle school?

It went beyond hopeless.

No, what right did I have to make comments about hope when I'd been responsible for keeping it from shining on her life—however, that's not where the hopelessness in Oikura's life ended.

Not by a long shot.

It would be a little more than two years until she entered high school. The period between her second term in middle school to the time she graduated—hopelessness descended upon her again while she'd been away from this town. Misfortune descended upon her.

A kind of misfortune not nearly as bad as incurable illness, starvation, or war: the disappearance of her mother, as she mentioned at the start. The girl deserved at least one decent thing happening in her life—but so far, nothing. It was always in shambles, just like the balance of the room's furnishings.

It was a mess, and—lacked so much.

"I don't know just how great of a person you are—well, I do know just how base of a person you are, but you'd have turned out the same way with parents like mine. I mean, I wish they were police officers."

"It's not like parents get to choose their children," I argued needlessly again. The words were in part self-reproach, but they seemed to strike her heart much harder than I expected. She looked astounded.

Then she nodded. "Yes. My mother said the exact same thing—to me."

To be honest, I had big expectations, she said. That my life might reverse course. That it might be my big turning point.

"I'd been off the mark in hoping that you'd do what I wanted you to do, but I still had expectations. I thought nothing worse could happen now that my family had fallen apart. I told myself I'd already seen rock bottom. Really, that household had always been broken, even when I was an elementary schooler—I knew what was coming. But I thought failing meant I'd be able to get back up and try again. That after all the tragedy, someone like me would get to lead a happy life. That's what I expected because it wouldn't make sense otherwise—but that's not what happened at all. My life kept on being tragic."

“You’re saying the violence continued? From your…mother?”

“Wrong. Were you not listening to me? My mother hit me to take her mind off of my male parent hitting her. She wasn’t going to hit me now that the piece of trash was gone.”

“…”

I still had trouble accepting that premise, but if her logic held up, it did at least mean the chain of violence had been broken. In that case, though, what was so tragic?

“One of my grounds for blaming my parents, the reason I’ve shut myself in like this for over two years□”

My mother shut herself in too.

“As soon as we became a single-mother household, the divorce finally caught up to her. She shut herself in a room of our new home and stopped coming out.”

“She stopped□”

“Can you even imagine what it’s like for one of your parents to shut herself in? I had to take care of her as a first-year middle schooler□isn’t that laughable?”

Go ahead, laugh, she hounded me, laughing herself□maybe because she’d remembered those times, or maybe because she found it funny that I’d been rendered speechless. I couldn’t tell.

“There are lots of books and shows out there for parents whose kids are shut-ins□but nothing about how to handle a shut-in parent. So back then… Well, back then, I guess I swore I’d never shut myself in no matter what happened. I didn’t think twice about breaking that vow a few years later, of course.”

But my mother’s case was a serious one, an extreme case of withdrawal. I look completely normal in comparison, Oikura said. She was saying she wasn’t as broken as her mother.

“It really was awful. She shut herself in a room with a locking door

and curled into a ball in the corner. I had to bring and take away all her meals. It wasn't long until she stopped eating altogether. Not only did my mother board up the windows, she kept the curtains shut all day long, making the room pitch black. Total darkness. She even unscrewed the bulbs so that no one could turn on the lights. And she kept on muttering to herself…muttering on and on about how parents don't get to choose their children. At some point she even started to ignore anything I said to her—like an adolescent or something. She was far more the adolescent than my middle-school self, much more the rebel. You sometimes hear about children giving birth to children—but I was a child taking care of a child."

Had the collapse of their household broken Oikura's mother's spirit? Had their household, violent or not, made her happy—supporting her heart and mind?

In any case, no, I couldn't imagine—what a daughter must feel when her mother falls into a state like that. Maybe Senjogahara could show some degree of understanding—no, even her case was different. She never had to take care of her mother.

"My grades at school plummeted. It felt so frustrating… All those kids dumber than me, passing me by. All because I was a good girl who cared for her mother… Well, the school did seem to consider my situation and offered me their egotistical sympathy by bumping my grades. Heh, I mean, how else would I have ever gotten into Naoetsu High with grades and a transcript like that…"

Perhaps that was why she seemed so unnecessarily proud to be a Naoetsu High student in my first-year eyes. Perhaps it was part of the reason for her math complex involving me as well.

Something she should have been able to do but couldn't. Unable to make use of her talents as opportunities were stolen from her—that feeling of being left behind. Given her pride, that multi-year stretch would have been an unimaginable struggle.

"But still, your mother is your mother—your mom is your mom. And your parent is your parent. I'd already lost one of them, so I thought I needed to be careful not to lose the other. That she'd decide to leave her room someday. That maybe she'd even apologize to me

for saying things like parents can't choose their children—maybe she'd say she was glad to have had me. After all, you never know what's going to happen in this world, right? No one knows what the future holds. Or are you going to say that the future is predetermined and locked in place?"

Oikura coughed here—not to pause, but as if she'd choked on something. She'd had trouble saying my name, too, so it did seem like she wasn't used to talking.

"Fortunately, Japan has relatively substantial social welfare programs. Even if my mother didn't earn money, even if my male parent never sent alimony or child support, get the right documents in order and a mother with one child can get enough to just barely put food on the table. So I never once thought life would be better if my mother disappeared—that I can be sure of."

Then it resumed. Her madness.

"I mean, I prayed every single night. Please, keep me from thinking life would be better if my mother disappeared. Please, keep me from thinking life would be better if my mother disappeared. Please, keep me from thinking life would be better if my mother disappeared. Please, keep me from thinking life would be better if my mother disappeared."

But.

My mother disappeared.

Against my wishes.

"She disappeared one day, without saying a word to me, without telling me anything—I came home from school and my mother was gone. She disappeared all of a sudden, without warning—just like me, wouldn't you say?"

They say girls take after their male parents, but I think I'm more like my mother—and.

Oikura laughed. I suppose she had her mother's laugh.

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“That’s right. I made dinner and took it to her room. When I unlocked the door and went in, it was deserted with not even a letter left behind. I say she disappeared suddenly and without any notice, but could there have been some kind of sign? Maybe not a sign, but a feeling… I felt like my mother was going to leave me behind and go off somewhere. Just like the way my male parent went off somewhere.”

My parents.

I don’t know where either of them is now.

Oikura spoke the words killing any emotions in her voice.

Just as she’d killed her self.

Just as she’d butchered her own heart.

“She seemed to reminisce about the old days, so at first I thought she went off to wherever he was… The thought made me not want to look for her, but that might be the case when I think about it now. She didn’t want to try all over again, she was only grieving over her misfortune that was the divorce in any case, it freed me from having to take care of my mother. I caught back up on my studies. I found a relative who could technically be my guardian and returned to this town thanks to assistance from the state. I didn’t really want to come back since I didn’t want to have to meet you…but this was the only open spot.”

By open spot, she must have meant a place to live. Yet another correct read by Hanekawa she needed to consider a career in fortune-telling or something.

Hanekawa, however, had a troubled expression on her face.

Hm? What was it? Was something in Oikura's story giving her pause? True, it was difficult to listen to, but her expression didn't exactly match the situation…

I didn't understand, but if Hanekawa was deep in thought, I needed to be on even higher alert.

"So why did you decide to live alone?" I asked. "A relative who's only technically your guardian is still a relative. And why bother moving when you could have kept on living in the home you shared with your mother? You said yourself you didn't want to come back to this town."

"Because it was a dump. Taking care of my mother kept me so busy that I didn't have the time to do anything like clean. It was too big for one person to manage, anyway… I thought it'd be better to ditch the whole house rather than get to work cleaning it."

Ditch the whole house.

Ditch.

Could she have hesitated? No, I doubted it. If she'd been pushed to that point, it must not have been something worth protecting or caring for.

With no home and no household□why keep protecting a plain house?

"I put the lessons I learned to use and decided to go light on the furniture here. Nice and tidy, isn't it?"

In an unusual move (maybe just a blunder from her perspective), she looked to me for agreement. I might have obliged her, but couldn't□not in this room.

Yes, it was nice and tidy, but not because it was light on the furniture. It was devoid of furniture□the room lacked balance because she was putting whatever lessons she'd learned to use.

Learned them?

If anything, those lessons were dead.

This wasn't what you called ordered or tidy.

Also, she'd ignored my first question, surely on purpose. Why choose to live alone when she had a nominal guardian—was it such a stupid question that she couldn't bother to answer it? Well, maybe it was.

It answered itself.

She'd spent two years straight caring for her caretaker—being placed under anyone's care must sound like an absurd joke to her. I didn't know how it all worked legally—but it seemed that Oikura had taken care of the problem now that she'd managed to receive public assistance and live alone here in public housing.

In any case, Sodachi Oikura returned to her hometown—the town where she spent her days as a young child.

I already knew what came after that.

She and I were reunited at Naoetsu High, but I'd forgotten about her in every conceivable way, and just as she thought she'd built a place for herself as the class leader, her homeroom teacher and classmates brought her low—or rather, she fell in a pit of her own digging. Then, she spent two years in this room.

Shutting herself in, just like her mother.

Regardless of any differences in the gravity of their circumstances, she'd spent just about the same amount of time shutting herself in a room as her mother—and then the day before yesterday, having learned somehow that Tetsujo had gone on maternity leave, she finally decided to return to school. Of course, this return, too, hit a snag…

"Do you understand? I'm not that misfortunate," Oikura concluded.

Rather proudly, in fact.

With a tense grin.

“Could happen to anyone, right? Happens all the time to people, to one extent or another… You could barely call it a story of struggle. Okay, I might’ve had a little harder time than the average person, but how can anyone survive in this world if you’re going to say that? Sure, it’s unusual that I had a shut-in for a parent, but I should be grateful for the precious and rare experience. I’m not the only misfortunate person in the world, so I need to keep working on things. I think I’m on the fortunate side, seeing as I’m alive.”

“…”

I couldn’t call this an argument she placed before me, given how flimsy it was—she probably believed her own words less than anyone.

“So again, I don’t need your sympathy… You don’t need to apologize or atone, Araragi. Forget about any kind of penance. Just talking about this kind of feels like a load’s been taken off my back, anyway…”

You’ll feel better once you talk about it.

Those words—who had said them to me?

“And all of that is in the past—whatever old stories you’re looking for are ancient history. They’re all tales that have come to an end. I know I picked fights with you because you annoyed me…but I don’t want you to do anything for me after all this time. If I had to make a request, then—”

Could you leave?

That’s what she said.

She seemed to have grown smaller over the course of the hour—one or maybe two times over. It went without saying that her situation wasn’t any better just because she finished talking about it all, but it did look like she’d been exorcised of something, all the pride she’d expended to face me dissipating—was that it?

Was Oikura picking fights with me ever since my first year in high school not because of anything that had to do with math, or

because I hadn't given her the help she'd wanted—but because I'd forgotten everything about my two interactions with her? Was that the key? And now that it was all clear, now that she'd made me remember, now that she made me know and thrown it all in my face, did she no longer feel possessed?

I'm sure Ogi would laugh if I said that. Oh, how she'd laugh—Miss Oikura hates you because she resents you, isn't that obvious, she'd say.

"…"

This was her residence, so we had no choice or room to fight if she was telling us to leave. We'd have to—but we hadn't completed our goal of getting her to come to class. We might as well have not come at all if we were going to leave now—and so I thought I'd say something to Oikura for the time being, but just as I began calling her name, O—I was interrupted.

"Miss Oikura," Hanekawa finally spoke up—but with an odd question, one that seemed out of place and off topic. "Did you say—you unlocked the door?"

"Huh? What?"

Oikura looked confused for a moment, as if she didn't understand the words—but she'd used them herself, and quickly realized that Hanekawa was referring to the time she discovered her mother was missing.

"Yes—that's right." Oikura nodded. "I unlocked the door and went inside, and my mother had disappeared…"

"But the windows were boarded up, right? And if the door was locked," Hanekawa repeated—"how did your mother leave?"

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Hanekawa's point startled me—I'd completely failed to ask about this, but yes, it was strange. I never expected to encounter another "locked room" after all that had happened, and the circumstances around this case were different from that strange classroom I'd been trapped in with Ogi. A plain locked room with no relation to aberrations, and one that suggested foul play—this really was like a mystery novel.

A simple, uncomplicated locked room, making it impossible to know where to start—a room with boarded-up windows and a locked door? The structure was too simple for it to contain any kind of tricks. And Oikura was saying that a human being vanished from inside of it?

A disappearance from inside a locked room.

A universal theme, yes, but…

"How? Through the door, how else?"

But Oikura, a party to the case, didn't seem to get what Hanekawa was saying—and was wondering why she was so caught up in minor details.

"You just have to turn the lock from the inside to open the door. Then she can leave, right?"

"Was it an auto-locking door?"

"Just how modern do you think our place was? It was an old rental, so it had a normal lock. The key was sitting around somewhere or other, though, so she must have locked it again as she left."

Oh.

Well, that did serve as one logical explanation—but I felt I knew what Hanekawa was thinking. Would a person who was about to disappear go to the trouble of locking a door back up?

Wherever she was disappearing to, wouldn't she want to leave the scene as quickly as possible to pull off her disappearing act? At least, it was hard to imagine she had the presence of mind to search for a key that lay somewhere or other. Even if she did have the time.

In other words, the fact that Oikura had to open the lock when she discovered her mother's disappearance didn't make logical sense.

"Why do you care about such a minor detail—I could be misremembering, or maybe my mother locked it for no real reason. Thinking it was better."

"Well, okay, sure—" Hanekawa said.

It was as if she was only pretending to listen to Oikura's view—well, she did listen, but not as if she was taking it into consideration. Hanekawa's feeling that something was off must have come from Oikura's story as a whole, not just this point—the mother's disappearance was the part that broke it all apart. Not that I had any idea what had precipitated her doubts…

But yes, overwhelmed by Oikura's story, by her upbringing, I'd neglected to do much thinking at all—but that was just me.

Oikura's view did have some merit to it, of course. Faced with Sodachi Oikura, a girl who rationality stood no chance against, who in fact only ever acted counter to rationality, it didn't seem that strange for a person to go out of her way to scrupulously lock up as she disappeared.

Hm. But speaking of locking up…

"In that case, Oikura," I said. "Forget about the door to the room, what about your front door? Was it open? Or was it locked?"

"Huh? Why would you bother asking… I don't remember," she replied sourly. "If I don't remember, that means it didn't make an

impression on me, so I guess it was locked? If it had been open, I'd have thought something was strange from that moment."

"…"

That would mean Oikura's mother not only made sure to lock up the door to her room before leaving, but the front door as well…

"I guess she wanted to make sure no burglars got in for the sake of the daughter she was leaving behind? I'm sure there was a spare key to the front door lying around somewhere…"

Probably not anywhere as obvious as under a potted plant, but surely you could find some kind of extra key to the front door with a little bit of searching, just like you could find a key to that room. At least, it wasn't physically impossible.

"So that burglars wouldn't come in, for my sake? My mother would never do something so admirable. She'd never act like some kind of guardian."

I'd been defending Oikura's view, if anything, but she shot me down… In the face of this irrationality, whether or not a door or two had been locked or unlocked seemed less significant.

Still, Hanekawa continued to think.

Almost as if she felt troubled□what exactly was she trying to focus on? At this rate, I couldn't possibly ask her about her promise to let me touch her chest, not that it was on my mind at all, of course.

Oikura seemed irritated.

"I don't get it… Does my mother's disappearance interest you that much? Why?" she said. "I don't understand most of what my mother did. I don't know why she suddenly disappeared□or why she let her spirit be broken over that man. I don't understand why she wanted to stick with someone like him when he kept hitting her. Did I say this already? Or did I not? It wasn't my mother, subjected to violence, who said she wanted a divorce, but my male parent□I really don't get it. What is with my family? Well, we're not a family anymore□we never were from the start. What's with me?

Tell me, Araragi…do you have any idea how I felt when I was taken into protection at your home?”

“Huh?”

“I thought you were putting on some kind of show—because I thought my house, my household was the norm. I couldn’t believe that a house with unbroken windows, unbroken walls, unbroken floors, a tidy little house like that—a household that peaceful could actually exist. That’s why I just kept glaring at you all—glaring at you without saying a word. Do you remember that?”

“Yeah…”

I nodded, but this was a lie. I didn’t remember anything about that time. But just as Sengoku remembered it clearly—Oikura had found it an intense experience as well.

It was all too bright, she said.

…I’m going to go ahead and say here that while my family might be unique in that both of my parents are police officers, we aren’t particularly special—I think we’re a very normal household.

When we didn’t get along, we didn’t get along, just like normal.

It was too bright for her.

The completely normal.

Even the ways we didn’t get along.

“It was too bright for me—and so I ran away. It dazzled my eyes and I thought I’d go blind. I thought the warmth, the comfort there would destroy me. But it was no good. Too late. Once I saw that, I realized how miserable my own house was.”

It would’ve been better if I didn’t know.

It would’ve been better if you and I.

If we had never met—said Oikura.

“Once I realized that, it was hopeless—when I tried to act out and do something about it, I was called rebellious. It got me hit even more. I was beaten when people wouldn’t see, in places people couldn’t see. But while I’d run away once, I couldn’t do it again. Not anymore. Which is why I even thought it was some kind of fate that we met again in middle school—I tried so hard to pander to you, remember?”

“…”

“Of course, as a result, I was a little too harsh with you when we were reunited for a second time in high school… Not that it mattered, since you’d forgotten about me anyway.”

And now she was an emotionally unstable girl during this, our third time being reunited. As if all of her personalities had merged…

She’d walked a terrible road.

She had lost her way—to the point where I wondered how one person could stray so far.

“God… Things never go well for me, do they. Just as I thought I could finally start over now that Tetsujo is gone, I get put in the same class as you again. Unbelievable.”

It really does feel like some kind of fate, Oikura continued.

“Some kind of cursed fate. You show up at every turning point in my life to spread disaster everywhere.”

“It’s my fault?”

“Yes. My life is a total mess thanks to you—no.”

She shook her head.

Forcefully.

“I know. It’s not your fault, I’m the one to blame—it’s not even my parents’ fault. My mother was right, she’d have had a more decent life if she’d given birth to anyone but me. I’m to blame. I’m to

blame. I'm to blame."

I'm to hate.

I hate me.

"But you know, Araragi, I can't keep going unless I make it your fault. I'm sorry, but won't you play the villain for me? It's no good anymore, making my parents the villains just isn't enough."

"Oikura□"

"Why doesn't it ever go well? I'm doing everything I should be doing. I'm working hard, I'm giving it my all… Sure, I'm messed up in a lot of ways, whether it's my personality or my head, but…I haven't done anything so bad that I deserve this kind of punishment, have I? Tell me, Araragi. You're happy right now, aren't you? And if you think I've done anything at all to contribute to that, if you'll think that for my sake, then tell me. Why can't I be happy?"

"You can't be happy because…"

It was Hanekawa who answered□before I even got a chance to think.

"You're not trying to be happy. No one can make you happy when you're not even trying."

"Sounds like you know this from experience."

"I don't know everything. I only know what I know."

For some reason, Oikura's expression relaxed when she heard Hanekawa's harsh words. Then□

"You know, you're exactly right. Bingo," she said□as if this was some kind of quiz with a prize attached. "I mean, I'm so fragile that I'd be crushed like a bug if I ever was happy. Both my eyes and my body, destroyed. I can't bear the weight of happiness. I'd rather be soaked from head to toe in lukewarm unhappiness and make do with it than be happy after all this time. I want to live with

drenched shoes. And that's what I've done… Yeah. I don't want to be happy after all this time. It's too late."

Too late.

In that case, when could I have made it in time?

Two years ago? Five years ago? Six years ago?

Or was it already too late before any of that—for my childhood friend.

Was it all in the past, something that couldn't be undone at this point, too late and irrecoverable? No.

It wasn't.

That wasn't it.

Hanekawa was right, attacking your old self isn't learning from the past, but a way to avoid responsibility—but that doesn't mean the right thing to do is to give up and cut the past loose. I don't know what the right thing to do is—I don't know what's right. It's something I've lost sight of, something I've lost.

But I did feel like I knew when something was wrong, and I wasn't wrong to think it was wrong to leave her like this and go home.

"There's no such thing," I said. "There's no such thing in this world as happiness so heavy it'd crush you. Happiness isn't bright or heavy. Stop overestimating happiness. Happiness in all its forms suits you fine."

It's perfect for you.

Tailor-made—it'd look just right on you.

"So don't hate happiness like that. Don't hate the world, don't hate everything around you—don't hate yourself. All of that hate in you, give it to me—I'll accept it, so please, you need to start loving yourself more."

Start loving Sodachi Oikura.

You can hate me as much as you want—so just love yourself.

At least as much as I used to love you.

“It’s true, I’m happy now—which is why I can say this! This kind of thing is normal for anyone!”

Nudge.

I felt a light jab to my side—it was Hanekawa.

This brought me back to my senses.

What was I saying? What was I doing? Hanekawa was finally talking to Oikura and I’d interrupted her—I should have left the rest up to Hanekawa once she got started. But I had to butt in.

I gritted my teeth, ready to be scolded—but she just pulled her hand back and whispered so that only I could hear.

“Nice one.”

It did relieve me to know that my reckless words hadn’t displeased her—but the question remained.

Of how exactly Sodachi Oikura took them—my reckless, even ungrateful words aimed at this girl, who had undoubtedly been responsible in part for my happiness. And she took them by saying—

“Town Hall.”

Town Hall?

She looked up—like she was tired.

“Someone from Town Hall is coming soon. I’m sorry to say this just as you’re getting this passionate, but really, could you please go home? They’re going to check if everything is fine with my living situation… If I’m being honest with you, they’re just barely overlooking the fact that I’m not going to school. It’d be really bad

if they saw me arguing with my classmates.”

An excuse to drive us off?

But in that case, wouldn’t she have used it earlier?

Which meant it wasn’t a lie. At least, Hanekawa seemed to come to that conclusion.

“Oh. Then we’ll leave for today,” she nodded. “But we’re coming back again tomorrow. And the day after, weekend or not. It might annoy you, but that’s how we do things. We annoy the people we like.”

Oh, oops, Hanekawa continued, tacking on another comment.

“I almost forgot. I ought to say this first. I actually kind of like you a lot now.”

“…”

Those words.

Those words from Tsubasa Hanekawa made Sodachi Oikura look sincerely troubled and she looked at the floor, resentfully it seemed.

“In that case,” she said.

In that case, you two.

“I want you to find my missing mother. If you do, I wouldn’t mind going to school for you or even apologizing to Miss Senjogahara.”

012

Hanekawa and I, class president and vice president, should have been happy to know the exact goal we needed to work toward—but when I thought about it, it could also be seen as Oikura brushing us off, a declaration that she wasn't coming to school if we didn't find her mother.

"I would be fine with that—the fact that we're seeing even the smallest signs of the misunderstanding between you and Miss Oikura starting to thaw is really as good as it can get."

"Signs of it thawing, huh? Well, if you're okay with it."

In reality, we must not have done much more than stir Oikura's emotions. They might settle back into stubbornness by tomorrow—and if not tomorrow, then the day after.

The sculpture that was her hatred for me had spent two, five, or maybe even six years hardening and settling into place. It wouldn't be that easy to melt it all down—we had to approach this with patience.

"But should you really say that's as good as it can get, President Hanekawa? Our mission is to get her to go to school."

"I don't plan on forcing her to do anything so long as she settles things with Miss Senjogahara, or at least cools them down—high school isn't worth attending begrudgingly, anyway."

So even Hanekawa, with her commitment to seriousness, was going to say that—but true, it did feel like I had no right to urge Oikura to go to school. She wouldn't have to go to school to graduate and head to college, she only needed to make sure she got good grades. There was no need for her to force herself to live a miserable school life—but.

“Yes, but, if she can have an enjoyable school life,” said Hanekawa, “I want her to live it, even if it means forcing her for the half-year she has left. Your adolescence is your adolescence, even if it’s short. She’s going to have to apologize to Miss Senjogahara.”

“That seems like the toughest problem of all to me…”

“If you’re going to be solving problems, isn’t it more fun to start with the hard ones?”

We left Oikura’s place, climbed down the stairs, exited the building, then moved to the plaza inside the apartment block it seemed like the kind of plaza where residents would have their children play, but it was deserted, either as a result of the time of day or for some other reason.

The desolate sight was sad, but just right for thinking. We decided to consider things there to consider the case of Oikura’s mother’s disappearance from the locked room.

Of course, it was only a disappearance from a locked room if you looked at it from a mystery-novel perspective. In fantasy fiction, it was called being “spirited away” after all, an adult human being had vanished like smoke into thin air.

What I expected was that we’d each go back home and bring our findings to school the next day after a night of consideration, to discuss the matter and come to a conclusion I assumed we’d be on that kind of schedule. But maybe that’s the difference between genius and mediocrity because Hanekawa said, “Okay, let’s at least figure out what direction to go in while Miss Oikura’s dealing with Town Hall. If we can come up with a good enough conclusion here, we’ll be able to report back to her after this person leaves.”

True, this would let us make a deal before Oikura’s emotions had settled back down, and it would be ideal if she and Senjogahara came back to school the very next day… I could have thought for a century and not come up with the idea.

Putting aside the question of how realistic it was for two high school students to search for a missing person, something a real-life

detective would dedicate a huge amount of resources to□smart people are just so quick on their feet. These thoughts ran through my mind as I tried what seemed like a good starting point.

“I know what Oikura said□but I agree, something seems strange. I’m siding with you here. It doesn’t make sense for her mother to lock up if she left on her own. The front door is one thing, but the lock to the room she’d shut herself in? That seems especially□”

“I think the front door is strange enough on its own□I think Miss Oikura is right about that…even if she was just reflexively disagreeing with us. It really doesn’t make sense for someone in that tight of a psychological spot to bother locking the door to a house she’s not planning on returning to,” Hanekawa took the baton from me□even for her this seemed more like a brainstorming session than careful consideration. It felt like she’d replied with whatever came to mind.

It was hard to tell if clearing up those doubts would help us at all… to solve the mystery of the locked room? No, I’ll just say pinning down her mother’s whereabouts. It even seemed unlikely, but it was the biggest clue we could see at the moment.

“What possibilities can you think of, in that case? If Oikura’s mother wasn’t the one to lock the door□was she abducted? Did a kidnapper grab her mother and return the locks to their original positions as a form of camouflage?”

“Well, yes. That’s possible,” Hanekawa said. “It would make more sense for a kidnapper to resort to camouflage than someone trying to go missing□that, or an accident.”

“Like what?”

“As in she never had plans to disappear. She just felt like going out□so she locked her door to make sure no one came into the room while she was away. And she locked the front door as one does. Then she got into or encountered some kind of accident while she was out, making it impossible for her to return□or it’s possible that she felt like disappearing while she was out.”

“That does seem to be the best explanation we have right now.”

It was pretty hard to imagine what wanting to vanish felt like, but this did seem like a far more likely kind of whim than Oikura’s theory that her mother locked the room and the front door because she felt like it—but then Hanekawa continued, “I don’t understand why she’d randomly go outside after shutting herself in for all that time.” She shook her head. “Despite being a shut-in for two years, one day she randomly decides to go outside and randomly gets the idea to disappear? I could maybe accept one of those things happening, but both seems a little unreasonable.”

“Well, no. It’s only Oikura’s impression that she hadn’t left that room for two years. Who knows, she might have been sneaking out and doing some shopping while Oikura was at school.”

“Why bother sneaking out? We’re talking about an adult, it’s not like anyone would get mad at her if they found out.”

“But in their case, Oikura was taking care of her mother—and maybe she’d quit if she saw her mother strolling around town.”

What kind of a mother was I talking about? It was of course just a hypothesis, an example that I was proposing. Our missing person being Oikura’s mother, who had been under her own daughter’s care, though, was neither a hypothesis nor an example.

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. Keep going.”

“So, then…she left home, the way she always did. Though I’m sure it’d be hard to make sure not just Oikura but no one at all saw her… And then one day she came up with the idea of running off?”

The context didn’t seem to make sense when I tried to connect the dots with the first half of my idea. While it seemed improbable that someone who’d isolated herself from society for two years not only went outside but suddenly had the idea of vanishing while doing so, it seemed even more improbable for a pseudo-shut-in who’d been going outside in good health nearly every day suddenly deciding to vanish. She would have been living a normal life, after all.

While I'm sure disappearances happen more often than locked-room mysteries and humans getting spirited away, it isn't the kind of thing you'd be thinking about if you're living a normal life—compared to that, it felt more realistic for a person who'd been a shut-in for two years to make a promise to herself to vanish.

Not that this was entirely about what felt realistic…

"Of all the ideas we've had until now, the only one involving someone else is kidnapping—can you think of any reason someone would kidnap not a child, but an adult, an adult at her residence at that? For ransom?"

"No, their family was living on government assistance… It couldn't have been for money. If they were targeting her in her home, they'd done their research… And it's not like there was any demand for money in the first place, right?"

"So it was herself they were after? Who could have a motive to kidnap Oikura's mother—her father? Oikura doesn't even know where he lives."

"Hm… I guess he would be one likely suspect."

At first, Oikura seemed to have suspected that her missing mother had gone to her father's, but in this case, it would have been the opposite, her father going to her mother. He'd been the one to file for divorce, but it did seem quite possible for an old flame to have reignited in him…

"That also raises the possibility that both of them felt like their relationship had been rekindled—in which case they eloped. I mean, she would have at least put up a little bit of a fight if it had been a forced abduction, right? And Oikura would have noticed whatever marks were left behind… No markings means that her mother could have been abducted after coming to some sort of agreement, even if it was a forced one."

"Hold on, Araragi. It's possible for a forceful abduction to leave no traces."

“Hm?”

“Well, Miss Oikura’s home may be nice and tidy at the moment, but at one point, she didn’t have the time to clean and it was full of trash, remember? If the place was a mess to begin with, she might not have noticed a scuffle.”

“Oh. Yeah… I guess you could compare it to Kanbaru’s room?”

A room on the level of Kanbaru’s might actually end up tidier if you had a fight in it, but assuming it hadn’t been quite that messy, Hanekawa was right.

“But of course, it’s possible that she agreed to leave, that she decided to set off on a journey—maybe even with someone else, not necessarily Miss Oikura’s father.”

“Like who? Do you have anyone in mind?”

“No, no one—I just wonder if she’d really leave her daughter behind like she was eloping if it was her ex-husband.”

“Elopement, huh—but in that case, getting a new start with her old husband seems like a possible explanation for leaving Oikura behind. They could try to make it work again if it was just the two of them—or something like that.”

“You seem quite familiar with male psychology, Araragi.”

“No, hold on, I don’t mean it like that—”

“I’m joking. That is something we’ll have to look into if we’re going to figure out where Miss Oikura’s mother went, though.”

Hanekawa clapped her hands together as if to mark a take. Maybe she wanted to punctuate the conversation here. I think it goes without saying, but she wasn’t applauding.

“I think we should consider at this point that locating her won’t necessarily be desirable for Miss Oikura. Of course, it was unlikely from the start that we’d end up with any happy outcome…”

“Well, yeah… If the signs really do point to a conclusion like her parents eloping on their own and leaving Oikura behind, I’d have a tough time telling her. No matter how I think about it.”

“It could be worse than just having a tough time. We might not be able to tell her at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“We should think of this separately from the locked room—but we can’t ignore the possibility that her missing mother is no longer with us. To take that a step further—her mother may have been killed by someone before this disappearance, or by the time she went missing.”

“Killed…”

“I know people are split on whether it’s easier to carry a corpse as compared to a live body…but the perp thought that a dead body would be easier to carry, since it wouldn’t struggle.”

“Hmm… You just as often hear that it’s hard to carry a corpse because it’s stiff and won’t try to support itself. People do seem to be split on that…but I guess there’s room to speculate which side of the argument the perp would be on. But,” I said. “Now that we’ve come this far, I think we need to tell Oikura about whatever we find, no matter how painful—or maybe not ‘we,’ it’s my duty. I’m sure she doesn’t expect to see her mother again, either.”

“That’s the thing.”

“Hm?”

“It comes down to why Miss Oikura gave us this important mission of finding her mother—isn’t that hard to understand?”

“Well…”

It vaguely seemed like a reasonable assumption that a daughter would want to find her mother, so it’d be a request she might make, but…it wasn’t as if she liked her mother. Her mother was only a bit better than her father, and the difference between the two may not

have been that large. I didn't know how Oikura mentally classified her mother or processed their relationship—but I did know for sure that this wasn't about her finding her mother because she wanted to live with her again.

What was Oikura after when she sent us looking for her mother? She surely would have gone with something else if she was only looking for an excuse to shoo us away…

Oikura's goal.

What was it—that she wanted to know?

"I don't know," I said, "but…there's probably something that she just can't come to terms with, and it's been nagging at her all this time… Don't you think that's possible? In other words, despite everything she said to us, she thinks there's something strange about the circumstances of her mother's disappearance in her heart of hearts. Vanishing out of the blue like that… She mentioned that she takes after her mother, and who knows, maybe that's why she's scared. She's afraid that she might disappear all of a sudden herself, for no reason at all—that she might fade away like a puff of smoke."

Vanish.

Just like she did in elementary school.

Not funny… I wasn't letting her.

I wasn't letting Oikura vanish—not again.

Practically speaking, even if locating her mother proved to be impossible, we would certainly get another chance to speak to Oikura if we came up with some line of thinking that provided a hint—not that I wanted her thanks or anything.

You know what it was?

This is what I thought—

It might not be so bad if I lowered my intensity as a human yet another degree from where it was now.

“Okay.”

Hanekawa again.

“Let’s start again from the very beginning and summarize all our doubts about her mother’s disappearance. We’ll decide which to keep and which to throw out—I know we didn’t come up with any decisive plans for a solution, but I really do think this is the most vital part. In other words, how did the room get locked? You don’t know, do you?”

“Right. I don’t know.”

“Reaaally? You don’t know?”

And then.

Darkness suddenly interrupted my time with Hanekawa—a blackout, like day had switched to night in an instant.

It was only an illusion, though. It was still before dusk—grown-out black hair had fallen across my face, that was all. It belonged to Ogi Oshino.

Ogi Oshino—Ogi.

Ogi was here.

“Huh, that’s kind of disappointing. You can’t figure out the mystery behind a locked room? I know that you’re a fool, Araragi-senpai, but even you, Miss Hanekawa?”

“…”

Hanekawa looked up.

Why is Ogi here—is that what she thought? No, not at this point. Hanekawa herself said that while it had taken some time to look up Oikura’s current address, it wasn’t by any means impossible—the “annoying” scenario she’d brought up. Ogi going back to school and looking up the address.

She grinned at us.

But even her smile was pretty scary in that case.

“Oh, I was just so curious, so I decided to come and check in on you, even though I knew I was being invasive. I thought there might be a chance you couldn’t be of any help, Miss Hanekawa… and I was right, sure enough. Heheh, I really do think you might be past your prime. Heheh, heheh. And to think that someone of your level snatched Araragi-senpai from me and walked off with him. It makes me want to laugh□my goodness.”

Ogi forced herself between Hanekawa and me, squeezing her body to fit there like some kind of battle for seats in a crowded train.

Even Hanekawa had to give in.

Part of her seemed baffled□though she couldn’t have been confused by the fact that Ogi was here, having predicted that she’d make it here before us. If Hanekawa found anything strange about this situation, it wasn’t Ogi’s presence, but why she was speaking to us now, at this exact point in time.

I didn’t know either□a grudge over what happened at the school gate?

“Yes, all that work you did luring him with those lumps of flesh on your chest□and nothing to show for it? Hah hah hah.”

A serious grudge…

I’d planned to follow up the next day, but it seemed I was too late. My leg work was only that of an average person, and I was going to have to pay for my torpor.

“Oh, how embarrassing. How embarrassing. I’d be so embarrassed that I couldn’t keep going. Getting him to pick me by seducing him with my feminine charms, only to cause him more trouble than if he’d gone alone? Even I look pitiful here, when I think about it. He wouldn’t have had to feel this way if only I’d been with him, but now it’s turned out like this because I let your breasts steal him away.”

Ogi turned to face me. She really seemed to be enjoying this. She was savoring the situation from the bottom of her heart. In other words, she enjoyed wedging herself in between me and Hanekawa.

“I’m sorry for making you feel so uneasy. Really, I am. If only you’d picked me back there. But I won’t blame you! I won’t blame you. That’s right, I won’t. Everyone makes mistakes, after all—isn’t that right, Miss Hanekawa?” she said, twisting her head to look at Hanekawa next. “You’ll forgive him too, won’t you? For making the huge blunder of choosing you. You know, why don’t you say it to him out loud? ‘You aren’t to blame for my foolishness, Araragi’—”

“…”

Hanekawa continued to say nothing to Ogi’s show of utter disrespect—maybe she couldn’t say anything? I had to, though. Ogi could act however she wanted towards me, but I wouldn’t stand for her being this high-handed with Hanekawa.

“Hey, Ogi—”

“Personally…” Ogi swung back around to face me. It felt for a moment like only her neck had rotated 180 degrees to face me, but I must have been seeing things. “Personally, I’ve already figured out that locked room.”

“What?”

“And where her mother might have gone off to—well, for the most part.”

To some degree.

Ogi chuckled faintly—as if to laugh at Hanekawa behind her. Though she faced me, her words were meant to attack Hanekawa.

“In fact, I can’t believe there’s someone who hasn’t figured it out, especially that there’s someone with big breasts who hasn’t. You have to be pretty stupid to be unable to figure out this mystery. I bet even you’ve figured it out actually, haven’t you, Araragi-senpai? You’re only playing along for the sake of a certain someone whose name starts with an H. It’s unthinkable for anyone not to have

figured this out. At least, anyone who tried to plunder someone else's fieldwork partner."

"O-Ogi□hold on, it's not like you've heard much about this situation yourself. You only heard a few scraps of our conversation as you arrived here, right? I don't see how you could solve this mystery with that alone…"

"No, a few scraps are more than enough here. So long as you don't have big breasts."

"…"

Her hostility toward big breasts was relentless.

It seemed that what really got to Ogi wasn't the fact that her fieldwork partner had been taken away, but that he'd been taken away by big breasts□I felt like I was finally getting a glimpse of her younger age.

Leaving that aside□what did it mean? Ogi claimed the locked room was simple, even if she was exaggerating to annoy Hanekawa.

Ogi's main investigatory tool was listening. As far as I knew, she wasn't like one of those master detectives who solved a mystery immediately upon arriving at a scene□no, but at the same time, I couldn't imagine it all being an act when she'd so deftly dismantled what happened at the class council meeting and in the derelict house. If she said she'd solved it, she really must have□the mystery of Oikura's mother's disappearance.

Ogi even claimed to know where she'd gone□qualified with a for the most part, of course, but it'd still be impressive. It might be enough to satisfy Oikura□getting her to come back to school.

Even then, it was hard to believe.

Mèmè Oshino's niece or not, how much could she have understood after hearing so little info?

"Ogi. Ogi□Ogi Oshino. What exactly□do you know?"

“I don’t know anything. It’s you who knows her in elementary school, her in middle school, her in high school. You know Sodachi Oikura so it shouldn’t be too difficult to pin down the truth about her mother.”

So long as you don’t have big breasts, she insisted.

“Speaking of, Miss Hanekawa. You used to have braids and glasses, right? It was a good choice to stop wearing those. You’d be committing fraud dressing up to look that smart when you can’t even solve a problem like this one. You’d be arrested, nabbed. But while this might have been an extremely simple practice question for me, if you seriously can’t figure it out, Miss Hanekawa, I suppose I could indulge you, since I want to be a good underclassman to you two. All you have to do is apologize for your big breasts.”

Apologize for her big breasts?

The weirdest situation ever.

Ogi seemed to mean it, though. She stood up from her spot between us to stand directly in front of Hanekawa facing her.

“‘I let all of my nourishment go to my boobs. Ogi, my junior, I just can’t solve this paltry question, so please, tell me the answer. I promise I’ll never snatch Araragi away from you again.’ Say that to me and I wouldn’t mind giving you the model answer.”

Clearly enjoying herself, Ogi stood there smirking of course, none of this had anything to do with her since she’d never met Oikura, who was just an investigation topic. It made sense that Ogi was treating it as some kind of game.

For me and Hanekawa, though, this was no game at all we could afford to be stubborn here if it was, but this involved Oikura’s life.

Afraid that Hanekawa was going to fold, I stepped in.

“Ogi!” I yelled her name a little emphatically. “I’ll ask you. I’ll be the one to ask. That’s good enough, isn’t it? So if you know, please, tell us. What happened to the Oikuras three years ago?”

“Really? Now, what should I do? I’m legitimately mad at Miss Hanekawa, but I can’t say no if you’re asking. You just have that effect on me.”

She seemed to be enjoying herself even more.

“What do you think, Miss Hanekawa? Shall I do as he asks? Shall I forgive his betrayal? Even you’d be able to figure it out then, so please, don’t stay so silent and answer me, I’m going to the trouble of asking you so that you can save face.”

Hanekawa didn’t answer. She only looked at Ogi□even in this situation, she seemed to be analyzing the presence that was Ogi Oshino.

Her true form.

Trying to see into her.

Trying to see past her.

“It’s so boring when you don’t say anything. You really aren’t as impressive as my uncle made you sound. You know, I bet you weren’t even that much to speak of in your prime. Everyone around you just held you up higher than you deserved. Fine, then. In that case, Araragi-senpai.”

Ogi let out a sigh, as if she was bored of poking fun at Hanekawa, and spoke to me.

“‘I made a mistake in choosing someone as unimpressive as Hanekawa. You are my only partner, Ogi. I like you more than Hanekawa, Ogi.’ Say that and I’ll give you the answer. The truth and all.”

“Wha…”

I hesitated.

She expected me to say that?

“I’m not compromising on this condition. I don’t want you changing

a single syllable, okay? Not even, ‘Ogi, I like your just-right chest over Hanekawa’s giant breasts.’ What’s the matter? There’s no need to hesitate, is there? Miss Oikura is sure to be happy to learn the answer—isn’t now the time for you to repay her for all she did? Or are you still going to prioritize Miss Hanekawa’s chest?”

Mixing in all that chest talk made it confusing, but she was right.

If this was for Oikura’s sake—for Oikura’s sake.

There was only one decision I could make. I could never abnegate my beliefs with words like those, but if I were to refuse, she might force Hanekawa to make a request she should never have to make—she might be forced to admit defeat to Ogi. That’d be even worse. Even if Ogi reached the solution before Hanekawa here…I didn’t want Hanekawa to admit defeat.

I didn’t want to see Hanekawa like that.

It was a terrible prisoner’s dilemma, but I was just going to have to fold before she did…

“You’d better not, Araragi.”

Then.

Hanekawa spoke.

“Don’t say it—even if it’s a lie, even if it’s for my sake, I still don’t want you saying anything like that.”

“B-But, Hanekawa—”

“I won’t say it, either. I’m going to snatch you away as many times as I like.”

Then she stood.

“Ogi. I want you to give me ten seconds to prove it—that Araragi was right to pick me.”

“Ten.”

Ogi began her countdown. No discussions, no negotiations. Right, the lightness of Ogi's footwork, the speed at which she made decisions was brilliant. Her rivalry with Tsubasa Hanekawa existed on more than a verbal level.

"Nine."

Hanekawa began to move swiftly. What was she doing, where was she going? She headed toward the water fountains in the corner of the plaza. The water fountains? She felt thirsty? At a time like this?

"Eight."

No.

Once she turned the spigot, she plunged her head into the stream below!

"Seven."

The valve was as open as it could go. What seemed like a waterfall drenched Hanekawa's head. She was like one of those ascetics. Was she trying to cool her head? That forcefully? Was she trying to cool down□because Ogi's provocations had gotten her worked up?

"Six."

Half of her time limit had passed. If this were a test, Hanekawa would already be checking her answers, but no, she was still busy bathing. She must have said ten seconds to keep Ogi at bay□I panicked. Shouldn't she have asked for at least thirty seconds, if not a minute? Then again, she must have thought that Ogi wouldn't accept the duel otherwise.

"Five."

She closed the spigot. Hanekawa quickly shook her head, like a cat who'd been in the rain□and something appeared different about her hair. Any dye in it had fallen off, showing about half a head's worth of white hair mixed in it. From afar, the black and white blended to make the whole look gray.

Gray matter, Ogi muttered before continuing□

“Four.”

Hanekawa returned to us with quick, long strides□forget about her head, even her uniform was drenched. It looked like a storm had opened up on her and no one else. She returned, then sat again, grandly. Water flew from her speed and force, but her intensity kept me from trying to wipe it off.

“Three.”

Hanekawa thought.

“Two.”

Hanekawa thought.

“One.”

Hanekawa thought.

“Z□”

“You don’t need to count to zero.”

Hanekawa finished thinking.

“I win.”

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“I win, but this is…”

Though Tsubasa Hanekawa declared victory, she seemed in no way haughty or proud—neither the victoriousness of victory, nor the winnerliness of a winner. I saw distress on her face if anything, like she’d savored the taste of defeat.

Ogi, meanwhile, was unchanged. Not a thing about her had changed. She was still grinning, even after Hanekawa’s proclamation—no, Ogi even looked to be enjoying this.

I had no idea what to do while the two fought this battle of wits off in another dimension. Knowing nothing, about either the mystery or their thoughts, I could only sit there quietly.

“You…”

Hanekawa spoke at last.

As if she couldn’t believe it.

“You really came up with this as your first theory? Minus any examination? You heard a fragment of our conversation…and came straight to this truth?”

“Yes,” Ogi nodded. “That’s where the thinking started—I took that hunch and, with some deduction, straightened out the story. Any other possibilities do seem very unlikely, after all.”

“How exactly does your brain work? Thinking of this off the bat isn’t the act of a sane person.”

Not the act of a sane person—Hanekawa used words that were unusually strong for her, but her facial expression made it clear that even they weren’t enough.

“You arrived at the same truth in the end, didn’t you? In that case, what right do you have to say that? You’re just as bad as me. It’s just a matter of speed. There’s no definitive difference between me and you. And isn’t Miss Oikura the one acting the least sane?”

“…”

“She is by far the least sane one here.”

“…”

Hanekawa said nothing in response. Even though she’d been told that her classmate, Oikura, wasn’t sane what was going on here? What was this truth that Ogi, then Hanekawa, arrived upon?

“Araragi… We can’t.”

Hanekawa said this facing me but not looking at me.

“We can’t… There’s no way we can tell Miss Oikura. I know you wanted to give her the truth, no matter what… I know you said it’s your duty, but even you’re going to change your mind once you hear this.”

“Change my mind…”

“Awww, you can’t do that, Miss Hanekawa. You can’t indulge the foolish you’ve got to make him think for himself a bit. He’ll be a fool forever otherwise. No matter how much time passes,” Ogi jumped in gleefully. “We need him to come up with it, too the truth of the matter that’s sickening even to come upon.”

It seemed this was letting her get over everything with Hanekawa, even her large breasts. Ogi may have lost the battle, but making Hanekawa come up with this mad truth was enough to satisfy her.

But what could it be? A truth that’s sickening even to come upon? A truth we can’t tell Oikura? A truth we can never speak? Was there really anything we couldn’t tell Oikura, after all she’d already gone through?

Something that surpassed, that undercut the status quo?

“So you want me to come up with this awful truth, but□”

“Hint 1. Miss Oikura’s mother is already deceased,” Ogi declared.

Okay, that was one of the possibilities I’d considered□but why did Ogi, then Hanekawa, come to that conclusion?

“She’s dead… Which means, okay… Oikura’s dad killed her mom or something? And this led to her bizarre disappearance. The way she vanished as if she’d been spirited away□”

“Completely wrong.” Ogi shook her head. She graded my answer harshly without even letting me finish. “You’re so kind. That’s the worst possible truth of the matter you can think of? All right, Miss Hanekawa. Please go ahead with hint 2.”

“M-Me?”

“Yes. I opposed you over your chest, but we share a common interest in wanting to educate him, do we not? Let’s work together to teach him. You’re even acting as his home tutor, aren’t you?”

“…”

A brief silence, and then□

“Hint 2.”

Hanekawa must have decided that while keeping the truth from Oikura was one thing, she couldn’t hide it from me as well. Still, it seemed like she’d been given a difficult role□like she’d sooner play the villain. I needed to arrive at the answer quickly to spare Hanekawa, but…

“Just as you mistook Miss Oikura’s home for an abandoned one when you were in middle school, Miss Oikura misunderstood something herself□she misunderstood something about her mother. She still does.”

“Oh, Miss Hanekawa. You’re giving him too many hints. I did too, in the first chapter, but□how indulgent. You’re oh-so-indulgent. You must be the one to blame for Araragi-senpai’s sorry state.”

“…”

Though she said Hanekawa had given me too many hints, I still didn’t have any idea.

The worst possible truth. The worst possible truth. The worst possible truth.

A misunderstanding.

“Her mother was murdered…and the culprit is Oikura, and she doesn’t realize it…or something?”

I tried saying the first thing that came to mind, praying it was wrong. There’d be so little hope in a truth like that□but if hopelessness was what backed up the right answer, was this it? Was this the worst possible truth?

“Bzzt.”

Ogi shook her head. I breathed a sigh of relief. This was no time to feel relieved, though□because if that was wrong, an even worse truth lay in store for me.

“I’ll concede the possibility that Miss Oikura’s story is entirely fiction, that she made it up from A to Z, and that really she killed her mother under completely different circumstances□but we’d never get anywhere if we started with such doubts. Yes, narrators can be unreliable, but at a certain point we have to decide to believe what other people say. Believe one another□we need to, don’t we? Don’t we, Araragi-senpai?”

Her words rang so hollow.

But she was right.

So, if I were to believe Oikura’s words□while also knowing that she’d misunderstood something.

If there was any kind of discrepancy there.

“Hint 3. Disappearing from a locked room does not necessarily

mean escaping from that locked room.”

As Ogi said this, she circled behind me again—she really did like taking my back.

Disappearance and escape were different?

True.

For example, there’s the classic mystery novel trick that’d surprise no one these days—in fact, it’d be more of a surprise if an author innocently used it—where the culprit hides somewhere in the locked room together with the victim’s body. The trick where it looks like he’s escaped, when in reality he’s still inside. In other words…

“In other words, when Oikura unlocked the door and walked inside, her mother was still there…and hid behind the door or something before sneaking behind Oikura to leave the house?”

“Bzzt. What would be the point?”

True.

It’d be pointless.

Why leave the room while Oikura was home, yet out of her sight, when the house was empty as she went to school?

It was a pointless risk.

The trick might be a possibility if her mother had been locked inside the room by someone else—but she’d shut herself in.

Though this was a locked-room case, it wasn’t the kind of mystery that involved some sort of trick.

“Hint 4. So, Araragi, if her mother passed away, why couldn’t she find the body? Why does Miss Oikura continue to treat her mother as missing?”

“…”

I'm sure it was by design, but it was as if Ogi had set up a situation where she and Hanekawa, two towering talents, took turns attacking me. I really wanted to come up with the answer, since I knew this was the last thing Hanekawa wanted to do□but if nothing was clicking in my brain, was it because my brain was refusing to click?

She couldn't find the body…

In other words, Ogi's roundabout way of saying she knew where Oikura's mother had gone off to for the most part must have meant she was dead and likely somewhere in the next life… Or did for the most part also include her still-missing corpse?

"Hint 5," Ogi continued, not pausing for an answer. "There are some things that even an excellent listener like me won't fully get from a tale told orally. While I may have only heard it secondhand this time around□I doubt I would have understood the exact details about that from Miss Oikura's story even if you'd picked me to be your partner. Thus, our investigatory fieldwork ought to go beyond interviews to include good, old-fashioned leg work in the form of an on-site survey□but what exactly could I be talking about?"

"Hint 6," Hanekawa took her turn. She wanted to end this as soon as possible. I felt irritated at myself for not being able to make it happen. "Miss Oikura had no time to clean up at her previous house. It was full of trash."

"Hint 7. Her mother suddenly disappeared one day. Suddenly one day, suddenly on that day. So what about the day before that?"

Ogi wasn't pausing either.

They were firing off hints at this fool.

"Hint 8. Miss Oikura's mother had been left with a terribly weak heart and mind when her family collapsed. To the point that she shut herself in. To the point where she lost the will to live."

"Hint 9. Miss Oikura looked after her mother, but it seems that at some point she stopped eating entirely. Have you interpreted this

‘entirely’ to mean ‘she must have eaten at least a little bit’? Have you decided on your own to go with a mild interpretation?”

“Hint 10. Miss Oikura said that her mother stopped responding entirely to anything she said…didn’t she?”

“Hint 11. And that she stopped moving from her corner of the room.”

“Hint 12. She didn’t eat, didn’t listen, didn’t speak, didn’t talk. Would you call that living?”

“Hint 13. Really, could a middle schooler care for a parent who’d shut herself in over a span of not just months, but years? Caring for a corpse might be another story, of course.”

“Hint 14. I wonder how long a human corpse retains its form.”

“Hint 15. The answer to hint 5 is ‘smell’□smell is just so hard to pick up on through an interview. You didn’t get much of a sense of smell from Miss Oikura’s story, did you? Taste is another very sensory thing, but we have a wide variety of ways of describing taste. Sweet, spicy, sour. For smells, we really just have good smells and bad smells. Aside from that, we’re only left with direct comparisons. The smell of roses. The smell of rain. The smell of milk. The smell of rotten eggs□the smell of a rotting corpse.”

“Hint 16. But a house packed with trash might envelop it all…even if there was a corpse there, and even if that corpse was in the process of rotting, the neighbors might not notice.”

“Hint 17.”

“Hint 18.”

“Hint 19.”

“Hint 20.” “Hint 21.” “Hint 22.” “Hint 23.” “Hint 24.” “Hint 25.” “Hint 26.” “Hint 27.” “Hint 28.” “Hint 29.” “Hint 30.” “Hint 31.” “Hint 32.” “Hint 33.” “Hint 34.” “Hint 35.” “Hint 36.” “Hint 37.” “Hint 38.” “Hint 39.” “Hint 40.” “Hint 41.” “Hint 42.” “Hint 43.” “Hint 44.” “Hint 45.” “Hint 46.” “Hint 47.” “Hint 48.” “Hint 49.”

“Hint 50.”

“I get it already!”

I shouted.

Or wailed.

I was nearly shrieking.

“You’re saying that—for most of those two years! Oikura was taking care of her mother’s corpse! Until it fully rotted! Until it was so fully rotten that it disappeared, and that she never noticed!”

Yes—that’s right.

I’d overlooked the truth during the class council meeting two years ago.

And in that derelict house, five years ago.

I still couldn’t remember my childhood friend from six years ago.

And so.

I couldn’t run now. I couldn’t avoid it now.

I had to face it. Sodachi Oikura’s tragedy—Sodachi Oikura’s madness.

That’s what it means to move forward.

What it means to properly face Oikura.

“A brilliant answer. Look at that! All it took was some effort—arriving at the truth of the matter after a mere fifty hints. You might be a fool, but you show some promise.”

Promise.

No, Ogi actually seemed impressed as she clapped with joy as if she

were offering me her unqualified praise.

“Yes—yes, so in that sense, Miss Oikura’s mother didn’t disappear suddenly. She disappeared gradually. After refusing to eat, she gradually starved to death and gradually began to rot. And once she decomposed to the point that her body was unrecognizable—once it had fully melted into the room, Miss Oikura realized that her mother had gone somewhere.”

Ogi continued as if she were making an aside.

“It’s like water evaporating. She hates water that thinks it made itself boil—was it? Well, you can say that her mother did make herself boil.”

“Water…”

“Have you ever kept bell crickets?” asked Ogi, gleefully bringing up an example. She was trying to explain the situation with an easy-to-understand analogy—so that the utterly tragic truth would be clear to anyone. “Well, I have… I like the sound they make. This is back when I was in elementary or so, though. Anyway, you feed them with cucumbers. Bell crickets just love cucumbers. I’d check in later to find that the cucumbers had vanished and think, wow, bugs have such incredible appetites! But apparently, it was something else. Cucumbers are mostly water, so they’d just evaporated and gone all thin.”

Oh, and also, the bell crickets were wiped out because they ate those rotten cucumbers, Ogi said, tacking on an unnecessary and unpleasant bit of detail.

“Miss Oikura’s mother also evaporated—humans do have a lot of water in them, after all. Disappearing into thin air, and evaporating. They end up meaning the same thing here, in an ironic twist—but that solves the case of the locked room, as well as the two locked doors. In that case, it’s only natural that the front door and the room were locked. Her mother never left the room in the first place. She hadn’t vanished like smoke—she vanished like water.”

“But humans aren’t made entirely of water. What about the rest?”

It was all I could do to pose that question□but Ogi simply answered, “Didn’t I suggest something about that at around hint 29? The fact that there haven’t been any real problems until now,” she stated plainly, “must mean that they dealt with her alongside the garbage when they dealt with a house full of trash.”

She spoke plainly about a human being disposed of alongside trash.

“It might even be the case□that an environment like that helped speed along the decomposition of a body.”

“Then what,” I asked.

Fearfully, bracing myself for an even more terrifying truth.

“It was…suicide by starvation?”

“I wonder. She may have lost her will to live, but I don’t think you call that suicide. Losing the will to live and wanting to die are two different things in the human heart. But I’m sure people will be split on this. Shall we take a majority vote? What do you say, Miss Hanekawa? There’s no way, right? A mother would never choose suicide and leave her daughter behind.”

Hanekawa didn’t answer.

Ogi must not have known. How could she?

She said she didn’t know anything, so she must not have known□that Hanekawa’s birth mother did just that, commit suicide and leave her daughter behind.

She could never have asked that if she’d known.

“All I think,” Hanekawa said quietly.

Quietly, painfully.

“Is that Miss Oikura ought to live her life not knowing about this and never knowing about it.”

“Yes. It would be better. But I bet a little part of her must think that

something is strange here. Which is the reason she asked you two to investigate. Why did she ask you to find her mother? That's why. A feeling that something is off, that she's covered something up—a feeling that she's pretending not to notice something. She must have had those kinds of thoughts—for the last three years. And she will for the rest of her life, too."

"No. Until today," I said.

To Ogi—and to Hanekawa.

"I'm telling her. I'll be the one to tell her. I'm going back to Oikura's room right now to tell her everything."

"What?"

Hanekawa raised her voice in shock, and while Ogi didn't, she looked surprised as well. Personally, I didn't think I was saying anything surprising—I was just going to do what I needed to do.

"That person from Town Hall must have left by now—so I'll go by myself, you two can just wait here."

"A-Araragi… Are you serious?"

"I am. Didn't I just tell you? I've been ignoring Oikura for all this time—for over six years. I haven't been able to look her straight in the eye, just like she wasn't able to face her mother's death. That's why I can't neglect Oikura any more than I already have," I replied to Hanekawa.

"There's no telling what might happen, Araragi-senpai—Miss Oikura might end up hating you even more than she already does."

"Don't worry, she can't hate me any more than she does now. Even if she can, if she's able to love herself through hating me, I'd prefer that," I replied to Ogi.

Then I began walking—to Oikura's place.

Not to apologize, not to atone.

To speak, to tell.

Yes, I was going to teach her.

As her senior just a few steps further down the road to happiness, I would teach her how to get started on it—of course, my pupil was the highly gifted Oikura. Once she had the basics down, she'd surely overtake me. Even when it came to happiness… Not that it was a competition. If she overtook me, I could just start learning from her. We could learn from each other, each of us teaching and furthering the other.

We could hold study sessions.

We were as foolish as people could be, but—

Why don't we get smarter together?

Let's be as happy as we should be.

"Is that really how you're going to repay her kindness? With malice?"

I could hear Ogi's voice from afar—and it made me think. Even if it was malice, I was so glad I had something I could give back to Oikura.

014

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next day, I was roused from bed as usual by my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi and headed to school□as I did, I asked my sisters something. I was able to hide her name from them because it had changed in the interim, but I asked them if they remembered a girl who had stayed at our home back during elementary school. Neither of them remembered. Just as I thought that's how it goes, it turned out the circumstances were different. There were so many children like that during so many different periods that they didn't know who I was talking about□it seemed I had many other forgotten childhood friends. I was disgusted with myself. I felt embarrassed about ever saying I wanted a childhood friend who'd come to wake me up every morning when in reality I'd had so many childhood friends. There'd be no point in hating myself any more than I already did, though. Oikura would hate me plenty.

She ended up not coming to school□I went to school that day but didn't find her there. While this meant she'd scrapped our promise, I couldn't exactly blame her.

"Like I said earlier…they were just barely overlooking my situation. And they said no more," Oikura told me.

I'd returned to her single-occupancy room after all that.

"The person who came from Town Hall…told me that I can't keep living on my own. They said they're going to cut my assistance by about half, so I can't keep living here. Apparently, a family is going to live here next□but that's fine. It sounds like they found public housing that's a little smaller…so I'm going to move."

I'm going to transfer out of Naoetsu High□she said. She was shockingly calm□could her strength have left her after the

conversation with Town Hall, with her life alone coming to an end, with this announcement that it was over? No, that's not it.

It was probably how Oikura was when it was just the two of us, the two of us talking—like over summer break during our first year of middle school. I understood now that her violent behavior in class was forced and a way to threaten people because she was in public—she was the type to get flustered in crowded places. In that sense, Hanekawa made the right decision when she tried to get me to visit her alone.

She also briskly accepted all of our speculation about her mother when I told her, and it was almost deflating.

"Oh—yeah, I should've known," she said.

It was how I'd reacted in the locked classroom when Ogi said the culprit was Komichi Tetsujo.

So she more or less knew? Unconsciously? No—probably not. She might have said the same thing no matter what.

She should've known.

Those were her thoughts on life.

"I knew I'd need to leave this town soon… But just as I found out, I went to school because I learned that Tetsujo would be taking time off. I thought that something might happen, that something might change. Then…"

Then.

Did something happen—did something change? Maybe nothing did, nothing changed. Maybe she only grew to hate me more. In the end—maybe she should've known. We spoke for a little longer, and I went home. I didn't stop anywhere on my way back.

So… To summarize, telling her, my childhood friend, the truth did nothing to improve our relationship, but it didn't do anything to make it worse, either. She would suddenly disappear, just like six years ago, just like five years ago—which is why I headed to school

without any concerns about running into her in class… I walked over as always, but as I did, the rousing sound of a bike's wheels began to catch up to me.

It was Ogi.

So she gracefully biked her way to and from school?

It was a pretty nice bike, too.

"Hiii, Araragi-senpai."

"Hiii? Ogi, why'd you leave before I got back yesterday? I told you to wait."

"Miss Hanekawa said we ought to leave."

"Why would Hanekawa say that?"

"She meant it in a nice way. Like, we ought to give those two some space…"

"No, she wasn't being nice. I left her apartment pretty soon, you know… But you weren't anywhere to be found in that plaza. Do you have any idea how surprised I was?"

Whatever.

It wasn't serious enough to criticize her over.

I wonder what Ogi and Hanekawa had talked about. While I doubted they hit it off…I wished the two could at least come to some kind of understanding.

"I was the loser yesterday," Ogi said.

As she did, she gave a little bow□though she didn't get off her bike.

"I'm sorry. To be honest, I underestimated you. I was convinced you'd run off with your tail between your legs□you showed me some guts that I didn't know you had at the end there."

"…I don't really understand your standards when it comes to wins

versus losses. You got me worked up, and Hanekawa too. What were you trying to do?"

A basic question.

"It kind of strikes me as strange. Just as soon as you transferred here, Tetsujo went on maternity leave, Oikura started coming to school, and then she went off and transferred just as suddenly. All these things that had come to a pause, these things we were pretending not to see, have suddenly started to move again, as if we suddenly remembered them…"

"Huh, Miss Oikura's going to transfer? I didn't know," Ogi said, ignoring my question. "I did think she made a good casting choice—in a way she was like the origin of all the heroines we've seen so far. I guess you could say she had the perfect character to get you all shaken up? Still, not everything went according to plan. That was a miscalculation—or rather, a missed expectation, which is to say, you deserve the credit here. I did expect Miss Oikura to add a little more chaos to the mix, though. I hope things go well for her at her new school. I'm sure she'll be able to succeed in a new world where nobody knows her. And that's thanks to you. It's all thanks to you."

"…What are you doing here, Ogi? Do you live nearby?"

Feeling that we were going nowhere fast, I changed the subject.

"Oh, you. Are you trying to figure out where I live? Remind me never to let my guard down around you.

"I was just looking for a lost child," she continued. "That's where it all started, after all."

"…"

Looking for a lost child? What a strange thing to say. Didn't she mean—she was lost, and looking for the right way? I could show her the way to school if she didn't know it, I thought—but she'd already begun to pedal again before I could say anything.

"I lost this time around, but if you'll allow me to be just a little bit

of a sore loser, my first move was only exploratory. I managed to meet my goal of seeing how you'd act around a childhood friend, so you could even say that losing was the perfect thing for me to do if I wanted to maintain a balance. Do be careful. There's no guarantee things will go this well next time. Journeys at night aren't the only time in life when every new step is taken into darkness."

She pedaled off in the opposite direction from school… Was she okay? While I worried about her, it wasn't as if I could do anything. I decided to stop seeing her off and to head on to school.

On my way there, I ran into Hanekawa. Or rather, she was there waiting for me at the school gates—she must have been waiting for a while, I thought, but when I asked, she said she'd only been there for about a minute. As if she'd predicted when I would come to school—the minute she was off must have been the minute I spent talking to Ogi. Did this mean that an invisible battle between Hanekawa and Ogi was still playing out? Whatever the case, I told her about what happened with Oikura.

"I see… That's too bad. I thought we could become friends."

Hanekawa did sound disappointed, but at the same time, she looked somewhat relieved. The sort of relief you might feel when you've escaped some kind of nightmare scenario—but I probably didn't know the nature of the nightmare scenario Hanekawa had in mind.

"Well, I guess we should celebrate this new step in her life," she said.

"Yeah. Ogi said the same thing."

"Could you go ahead and go to class, Araragi? I need to submit a notice of absence."

"Yeah, sure… Wait, a notice of absence? Huh? What, are you leaving Naoetsu High too?"

"Nope. I said absence. You know how I'm planning on wandering around after graduation. I thought I'd go scout out some locations for that. Just a little trip around the world. I'm going to be leaving

you on your own for about a month, so take care of things while I'm gone, okay?"

She was sure leaving a lot in my hands…

And a little trip around the world?

She made it sound like a lap around the athletic field.

Yes, I'd heard about her graduation trip, but…location scouting for it? Methodical people's brains really do work in a different way… She far surpassed my imagination, like an airplane flying overhead.

"I'll be sure to say hello if I come across Mister Oshino during my trip."

Oshino? I didn't see him going overseas too often… I had a hard time imagining him with a passport. Oh, but a trip around the world would include Japan, so it did at least seem like a possibility that they might meet.

In any case, I had no reason to stop Hanekawa. She may have brought it up far too suddenly, but I guess it was just another example of her quick footwork. I felt a little sad to know I wouldn't get to see her for a whole month, but I did everything I could to let that not show and send her off with cheer.

"Okay, then. If you do run into Oshino somewhere, let him know we met his niece."

"Yeah. Well, that's basically what I'm trying to do."

And so I arrived at my classroom, alone once again□and of course, I sat in my empty seat. The moment that I did, my cell phone rang. Uh oh, I'd forgotten to turn it off because I'd met Hanekawa by the school gates.

What a blunder.

Phew, that was dangerous□Hanekawa would have been shockingly mad if it had gone off around her.

New text message.

It was from Senjogahara.

“DEAR KOYOKOYO STOP MY FINGERS SERIOUSLY WERE FRACTURED SO I WILL BE GOING TO SCHOOL TODAY AFTER VISITING THE HOSPITAL STOP”

Why write it like a telegram…

The message might have started off cute, with that “Dear Koyokoyo,” but it said she’d actually broken her fingers when she punched Oikura. Well, she probably did deserve that level of comeuppance…which explained why she was going to the hospital instead of relying on my blood. It did seem like she would attend school today, though she’d be late. Did the thought that she might see Oikura never cross her mind? I still hadn’t told Senjogahara about what happened□I thought, as the next message arrived.

“DEAR YOKOYOKO STOP”

Yokoyoko? Had she developed dyslexia? No, she must have just typed “Koyokoyo” wrong. First the telegram-style message, then this. She amused herself in strange ways…

“MISS OIKURA CAME TO APOLOGIZE TO ME THIS MORNING STOP I FORGAVE HER STOP I AM OKAY NOW PARENTHETICALLY THOUGH MY FINGERS ARE FRACTURED STOP”

These messages were so annoying to read… Hm?

What? Oikura had gone to apologize? How did she know where Senjogahara lived? Senjogahara had entered a false address into the school’s records, and as far as I knew, she hadn’t corrected it… Oh, right. Oikura had gone to take care of Senjogahara back when she was sickly during our first year. Now that I thought about it, Oikura knew that Senjogahara would be going to college on a recommendation… If she knew that, did it mean she’d been concerned about Senjogahara even during her time as a shut-in?

Going to apologize, though…

Oikura had apparently kept her promise to make up with Senjogahara. And since the issue was resolved, Senjogahara could come back to school starting today—whatever the case, good. I needed to forward these messages to Hanekawa before she went off on her journey.

Then the third message arrived.

“SORRY FOR MAKING YOU WORRY KOYOKOYO STOP I WILL GIVE YOU LOTS OF SLOPPY KISSES DURING OUR NEXT DATE SO FORGIVE ME PLEASE OKAY STOP ☆☆☆ I AM A FREAK FOR YOUR FRENCH KISSES ☆☆☆☆☆☆ STOP”

How was I going to forward them to Hanekawa now?!

Just as I thought about putting my phone away, the fourth and final message arrived.

“A MESSAGE FROM MISS OIKURA STOP UNDER YOUR DESK SHE SAYS STOP BEST FISHES HI TIKI.”

Best fishes hi tiki?

What kind of ending was that? Was she trying to say we should get fish at a Polynesian restaurant? And maybe “Yokoyoko” was part of that, some sort of South Pacific greeting? But no, it was probably just another typo, and she meant to say “Best wishes, Hitagi.”

Great, now I began to wonder if she’d misspelled anything else. A message from Miss Oikura? Under your desk? What could it all mean, I wondered, but tried feeling around under my seat anyway—and.

I found something stuck there. Something like a piece of paper, held in place with masking tape—I peeled it off and took it in my hands.

It was an envelope. A thin, modern envelope with a design on it that I couldn’t remember ever seeing before—but while I didn’t remember seeing it, the envelope did feel familiar. Couldn’t I have found a similar envelope under a low table in a derelict house five years ago, during summer break?

That envelope was empty.

Feel alone told me this one held a note—the envelope may not have listed a sender or recipient on either side, but someone had stuck it under my desk.

Sodachi Oikura.

She'd kept every one of her promises.

She must have come to school so early that even most of our teachers hadn't arrived yet—and she'd placed this envelope under my desk.

The kind of girl who suddenly disappeared, without any warning. That was the kind of girl Oikura—no longer seemed to be. A small change, but a change in her. It made me happy, but also a little sad. Like she'd gone ahead and left me behind.

In that case, I needed to prove that I'd grown, too. Instead of tearing the envelope apart like I had five years ago, I opened it as carefully as I could—and extracted multiple sheets of paper. Now then. Did they contain a math quiz, or was it an uncharacteristic letter of thanks—perhaps an insulting, abusive message? It could be all three—let's take a look.

"Heh."

I broke out smiling.

Hey.

What do you think it said?

Afterword

When I belatedly think about how unreliable human memory can be, I realize that forgetting something doesn't particularly mean that it's just gone for you. This isn't about how forgetting and losing are two different things, or how you might actually remember something you thought you'd forgotten. This is about cause and effect—in other words, even if you've forgotten all about learning how to ride a bicycle, it doesn't mean you're unable to ride one, and not remembering where you read something doesn't mean you're unable to make use of the knowledge. That kind of thing. Forgetting doesn't result in a chain reaction. Going into more detail would require discussing the difference between episodic and other types of memory, and conflating all that stuff when you talk about it really is a mistake to begin with, but when I close my eyes to that fact and think about it, I find it somehow encouraging that forgetting something doesn't mean it never happened. You could even say that it allows us to delude ourselves into believing that in this uncertain world of ours, some things are certain. Speaking of delusions, a bothersome type of case here is when you aren't forgetting something but remembering it incorrectly. In other words, you think you remember learning how to ride a bicycle, but the episode was entirely different, or you've mixed up a tome that dispensed valuable knowledge with another book—not impossible, and when it happens, what an uncertain place it makes our world. What is right, and what isn't right? What is true, and what isn't true? If my memory serves me correctly—or turning that phrase inside out, if my memory serves me incorrectly, having to check myself at every turn makes for a pretty miserable life. Maybe we should just chuck these doubts?

And so, this has been part seventeen of the MONOGATARI series. Volume number seventeen. I think it goes without saying that this is the longest NISIOISIN series in history by a bit, but what a mess it all becomes once you get this far along. Seventeen volumes? You

can’t casually recommend that long a series, can you? Reading seventeen books is quite a feat. As for the author, it gets daunting, and my pen threatens to flow less freely. That’s why I decided to return to where I began and write this once more entirely, one hundred percent as a hobby. Now, of course, it led to such an outpouring that the work ended up getting split into separate volumes… But the hobby-esque latitude there is nice in its own way. Tasteful, even. And so, this has been OWARIMONOGATARI Part 01, “Chapter One: Ogi Formula,” “Chapter Two: Sodachi Riddle,” and “Chapter Three: Sodachi Lost.”

Ogi Oshino, who spent Second Season shrouded in mystery, has finally started to take off the veil and even made it onto the cover. Thank you very much, VOFAN. The End Tale is moving on to its latter part, and I’ll do what I can to keep there from being a middle part.

NISIOISIN

OWARIMONOGATARI, Part 1

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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